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**Minds Moving Upon Silence: P.B.  
Shelley, Robert Browning, W.B. Yeats  
and T.S. Eliot.**

**Serena Gosden-Hood**

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the  
degree of PhD

**Durham University  
Department of English Studies**

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## **Abstract**

### **Minds Moving Upon Silence: P.B Shelley, Robert Browning, W.B Yeats and**

### **T.S Eliot.**

The purpose of this study is to explore the function and significance of the various representations and manifestations of silence in the poetry of Shelley, Browning, Yeats and Eliot. Attention ranges from specific allusions to the absence of speech and sound, to the role played by punctuation and poetic form. The choice of these poets stems from Shelley's function as an acknowledged, influential precursor to both Browning and Yeats and, as an un-acknowledged, though arguably no less essential, influence on Eliot. The aim is to establish to what extent poetic interaction with silence alters and shifts in the period under study, and to make coherent the development from Shelley to Eliot in their fascination with silence, and its centrality to poetic expression.

The approach primarily involves close textual analysis of the poetry itself, the objective being to access a new angle of consideration by focusing on each poet's particular relationship with silence, and the extent to which this cumulatively expands into either a coherent philosophy, or a series of recurring themes on the part of the poet. The thesis is also concerned with poetic influence. Theorists who have previously written on silence, such as Steiner and Wagner-Lawlor, are also engaged with, as are critics concerned with the specific poets and epochs addressed (e.g Bloom, Ricks, Keach, O'Neill, and Perry). Chapters look in turn at Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, considering the role played by silence in the poem's consideration of the relationship between imagination and nature (1); at the same poet's treatment of the relationship between poetry and death (2); at Browning's relationship with the unrealized objective, especially in relation to love (3); at the role of the silent auditor in Browning's dramatic monologues (4); at the relationship between silence and the unknown in Yeats's poetry, and the extent to which he substituted an aesthetic approach for Browning's preoccupation with justice and pragmatism (5); at silence and the fertile nature of the contradictory in Yeats (6); at modernity and language's simultaneous pursuit of, and resistance to, silence in the poetry of Eliot (7). Overall, the thesis demonstrates that to discuss the silence of poetry should be as natural, and as necessary, as to discuss the language of it.

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## **Dedication**

In memory of my grandmother, Peggy 'Hammy' Gosden, who will always  
be much missed.



## Introduction

“If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote George Eliot in her 1874 novel, *Middlemarch*, and it is a thought that conjures an image of all that is obscured by a cursory and imprecise perception of our surroundings. It is also the germ of the notion that silence itself may be a far more populated condition than a traditional understanding of it would allow. Within this space, which is classified by its own quietness, there may exist a riot of sound that, could we attune ourselves in the necessary fashion, is only waiting to be heard and comprehended.

The relationship between silence and literature is, necessarily, one that falls somewhere along a hypothetical line between the cooperative and the combative. On the one hand silence can be understood as the antithesis of language, the inevitable and approaching absolute which our temporary rhetoric strives to eclipse and overwhelm. It might be said that an anxiety about silence, to the literary mind, is synonymous with anxiety regarding death. In Shakespeare we see the consummate rhetorician, Hamlet, declare, “But I do prophesy th’ election lights / On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice. / So tell him th’ occurs more and less /

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<sup>1</sup>George Eliot. *Middlemarch*. Ed. Bert G Hornbeck. New York: Norton, 1977.

Which have solicited. – The rest is silence.” (Act V, Scene ii).<sup>2</sup> There is some comfort perhaps to be found in passing, as Hamlet does, the metaphorical baton of the “voice” to a worthy perpetuator but there is still the emphasis on the fact that death robs us of our language. At the same time, however, Hamlet’s musical pun on ‘rest’ suggests that ‘silence’ has its own eloquence.

Poetry and silence formulate a perhaps even more complex relationship than silence and prose, insofar as the space upon the page, the visualization of silence, has a part to play in the synthesis of allusion and metaphor that may also serve to depict it. The porcelain gap following an unanswered question, the ellipses or colon that seems almost to enter into eternity, or the dash that, abyss-like, may separate one thought or image from another, all form part of the tapestry that makes up the language and imagery of silence in poetry. To say that every poem begins and ends with silence is not a remarkable observation but an exploration of the relationship each poem has with the underlying living and eternal silence, to which it can sometimes give voice, may help us to access the extraordinary.

The anxiety dimension of silence, its condition as the opposite of language, is something that has cultural ubiquity. George Steiner in his *Language and Silence* writes that:

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<sup>2</sup>William Shakespeare, Stanley Wells, and Gary Taylor. *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*. Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon Press, 1986.

Both Hebraic and Classical mythology have in them the traces of an ancient fear. The tower broken in Babel and Orpheus torn, the prophet blinded so that sight is yielded for insight, Tamyris killed, Marsyas flayed, his voice turning to the cry of blood in the wind – these tell of a sense, deeper rooted than historical memory, of the miraculous outrage of human speech.<sup>3</sup>

Steiner suggests that there is some essential human conviction of the transgressive nature of speech, as though the fact of “harvesting echo where there was silence before” must somehow have an unknown but decisive cost.<sup>4</sup> It is a thought that appears preoccupied with the unruptured purity of the natural world. Certainly nature is not silent but it does not generate the “miracle and outrage, sacrament and blasphemy” of human language.<sup>5</sup> This notion that humankind is in possession of something to which not even the immensity of the cosmos has access is an arresting one that cannot help but provoke the question of what it would take to harmonise the language of mankind and the silence of the natural world. It is a question that there seem few poets more fitting than Shelley to address, since it is he who, in such poems as *Alastor* and *Mont Blanc*, gives substance to the suspicion that poetry may be the one medium that is able to authentically inhabit this privileged space. The battle and balance between interaction and intrusion is,

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<sup>3</sup>George Steiner. *Language And Silence*. New York: Atheneum, 1967.p. 36.

<sup>4</sup>George Steiner. *Language And Silence*. New York: Atheneum, 1967.p. 36.

<sup>5</sup>George Steiner. *Language And Silence*. New York: Atheneum, 1967.p. 36.

as we shall see, pervasive in *Alastor*. It is an idea also understood by Steiner in the following terms:

Does the act of speech, which defines man not also go beyond him in rivalry to God?

In the poet this ambiguity is most pronounced. It is he who guards and multiplies the vital force of speech. In him the old words are kept resonant, and the new are lifted to the common light out of the active dark of individual consciousness. The poet makes in dangerous similitude to the gods. His song is builder of cities; his words have that power which, above all others, the gods would deny to man, the power to bestow enduring life.<sup>6</sup>

The need to imprint language upon the numinous and through it, to attain a transcendence of a new and alternative kind, is an essential dimension of poetry with which silence interacts as both a potentially annihilating and generating force. A poem such as Shelley's *Adonais* (which shall be the focus of chapter 2), for example, captures both the anxiety regarding the eradication of poetic language, and the impulse to compensate for it with poetry itself. Silence in poetic expression may never be a single, concrete concept or actuality, insofar as it is at once a creative expressive force and the thing that expression must necessarily eclipse. Thus our understanding of its relationship with poetry must always be, to

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<sup>6</sup>George Steiner. *Language And Silence*. New York: Atheneum, 1967.p. 37.

some degree, oxymoronic in nature, but it is out of such coexisting contradictions that poetry is fashioned. Jacques Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology*:

... after evoking the “voice of being,” Heidegger recalls that it is silent, mute, insonorous, wordless, originally *a-phonic* (*die Gewähr der lautlosen Stimme verborgener Quellen...*). The voice of the source is not heard. A rupture between the originary meaning of being and the word, between meaning and the voice, between “the voice of being,” and the “*phone*,” between the call of being”, and articulated sound; such a rupture, which at once confirms a fundamental metaphor, and renders it suspect by accentuating its metaphoric discrepancy, translates the ambiguity of the Heideggerian situation with respect to the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism. It is at once contained within it and transgresses it. But it is also impossible to separate the two.<sup>7</sup>

This mode of understanding the relationship between being and expression is one into which the concept of an articulate understanding of silence may be readily introduced and, indeed, which already seems to be attested to. Just as Derrida espoused the notion that the *logos* of meaning and representation in language is more accurately to be comprehended through an eradication of any suggestion of hierarchy between speech and writing, so too may we introduce the suggestion

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. p. 22.

that modes and manifestations of silence, which are intrinsic to each, form a dimension of our comprehension of both. Since language must always be preceded by silence it is to the nature and implications of silence that we must look for the beginning of our understanding of the two.

The objective of this study shall be to explore the dynamic, delicate and multifaceted relationship between language, silence and poetry throughout a series of poetic epochs, while following an already well-established arc of poetic influence. Shelley's uniquely fertile understanding of the relationship between silence, language and the natural world, as already suggested, constitutes a compelling impetus. The poems *Mont Blanc* and *Alastor* will be considered both as depictions of this and as a voyaging, particularly in the case of the latter, into the complex relationship between silence, spirituality and the scope and source of human imagination. With Shelley we also, as previously mentioned, will encounter an elegy rendered doubly pertinent by virtue of the fact that it is on the subject of another great, contemporary poet, John Keats. This, as we shall see, complicates and colours the condition of the silences that we encounter, sometimes eternal and all-encompassing, sometimes firmly grounded in the human sphere.

From Shelley a progression to Robert Browning, for whom Shelley was an acknowledged influence, seems both a logical and evocative shift. With Browning, however, we shall undergo a poetic odyssey whose interactions with silence are more pragmatic, or at least less ethereal. The quest for the spiritual evolution of

the poet becomes concentrated, with Browning, into a demonstration of how the formulation and expansion of any individual soul might best be achieved. Its thematic application is thus at once enlarged and contracted and its relationship to silence inevitably loses ethereality, though without ever wholly abdicating a concern with the otherworldly. We shall look first at “Youth and Art”, a more whimsical and embryonic depiction of the poet’s most salient concerns regarding the evolution of authentically satisfying human relationships, before considering such poems as “The Statue and the Bust”, which serves as a cautionary tale about the potential for generating an impermeable silence through an initial failure to speak and act during the pivotal moment. There will also be focus upon the potentially devastating effects that a misunderstanding of the needed action or articulation may have upon both soul and scenario through such dramatic monologues as “My Last Duchess” and “Porphyria’s Lover”. This, in turn, will provide an opportunity for a consideration of the underappreciated role of the silent auditor in the context of this particular mode of poetic structure. Finally we shall consider the intangible, but intensely evident, relationship between silence and music in poetry (something we also see addressed in Steiner) through an analysis of “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”.<sup>8</sup>

Yeats, as a poet who largely defies classification within any poetic movement, presents a challenge of a unique but harmonious kind, insofar as both Browning and Shelley were to him precursors of resonance and impact. With

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<sup>8</sup>George Steiner. *Language And Silence*. New York: Atheneum, 1967.p. 43.

Yeats we once again encounter the formulation of a kind of personal theology that infiltrates, and interacts with, his poetic philosophy. We will consider the relationship between silence and the pre-history moment with “Long-Legged Fly” and shall also address a version of the relationship between silence, or the absence thereof, and poetic expression in politics through “Man and the Echo”, something which Steiner also touches on in the context of twentieth century totalitarianism:

The second point is one of politics, in the fundamental sense. It is better for the poet to mutilate his own tongue than to dignify the inhuman either with his gift or his uncaring. If totalitarian rule is so effective as to break all chances of denunciation, of satire, then let the poet cease – and let the scholar cease from editing the classics a few miles down the road from the death camp. Precisely because it is a signature of his humanity, because it is that which makes of man a being of striving unrest, the word should have no natural life, no neutral sanctuary, in places of season bestiality. Silence *is* an alternative. When words in the city are full of savagery and lies, nothing speaks louder than the unwritten poem.<sup>9</sup>

For Yeats, as we shall see, there is an internal battle to be waged between the fear of the unknown physical cost of speaking and the obscure spiritual price of remaining silent. Such poems as “Cuchulain Comforted”, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” and “Ego Dominus Tuus” will also be pivotal in the context of

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<sup>9</sup>George Steiner. *Language And Silence*. New York: Atheneum, 1967.p. 54.



understanding Yeats's relationship with his own spiritual philosophy and the inevitable silencing of his creative genius through death, as will a consideration of Yeats's prose piece, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, for which "Ego Dominus Tuus" is the poetic epigraph.

Finally an exploration of perhaps the consummate poet of the Modernist epoch, T.S. Eliot, may appear incongruous in light of the arc so far followed but it is my intention to demonstrate that, whether knowingly or otherwise, echoes of the linguistic and thematic preoccupations of these earlier poets may be found in this more recent one. There are also questions of the breakdown of traditional forms of poetic expression, and even language itself, that renders Modernism a fecund territory for an anxiety of poetic silence. In Eliot, we seem to encounter a fear of creative and cultural drought that is responded to with a deluge of expression, but it is an expression that owes its existence to a rising fear of impermeable silence. Eliot's is a nostalgia that is, paradoxically, suffused with an impulse to innovate and redefine questions of language, beauty and humanity, in other words all that might be said to engender poetic expression. The obvious choice for an exploration of these themes is *The Waste Land*, in light of that poem's preoccupation with the resonance of past language in conjunction with the comparatively evacuated nature of the present.

Ultimately, my intention is to explore the fashion in which the poetic relationship with silence alters and mutates as we march gradually into modernity. It is my contention that silence, as much as language, is a perpetual and intrinsic

dimension of poetic expression and even that, oxymoronicly, silence constitutes a language of its own. It is, however, a language that can only be heard and understood once silence comes to be recognized as an aspect of its own apparent opposite, which is a circumstance that requires a comprehensive reconsideration of the nature of language, silence and antithesis itself.

## **Chapter 1**

### **“Thou hast a voice, great Mountain”: Silence, nature and the poetic voice in Shelley.**

The affirmation that language is not a component of the natural and physical world may appear superfluous, and yet such an assertion is essential within the context of a consideration of silence in the poetry of Shelley. The relationship between silence and language is founded on the recognition that the latter is solely a product of human consciousness while the former may exist both within the context of language and as an autonomous, organically occurring, element of nature. For Shelley, the silence of the natural world may, paradoxically, serve as a transcendently vocal testimony to its substance and power, and yet the condition and quality of this resonating silence cannot be explicated without the component of human language.<sup>10</sup> Thus language is both inflicted on, and inspired by, the oceanic and majestic silence of nature, a circumstance that renders the relationship between the poetic voice and the natural world a fecund and multifaceted one.

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting here that the word “power” in *Mont Blanc* carries a more complex connotation than is immediately apparent. Much of the latter portion of this chapter is dedicated to the explication of this term within the context of the poem, and the poetry of Shelley in general.

Shelley's *Mont Blanc* is illustrative of this synthesized, yet segregated, relationship.<sup>11</sup> In the opening lines of the first section, Shelley presents the reader with an image of the physical world of “things” moving, with a relentless and metamorphosing certainty, “through” the “mind” (1-2). This immediate connection between consciousness and the physical world serves to set the scene for the balance and development of the poem, which seeks to illuminate and deconstruct the relationship between these two ostensibly autonomous manifestations. There is a condition of mutual dependence here that the poet strains both to understand and, ultimately, to demonstrate. It is first attested to in the reference to the “waters” (6) of the mind’s perception of the “everlasting universe of things” (1), that have “a sound but half [there] own” (6). I have used the phrase “mutual dependence”, and yet that, in itself, is problematic since it is implicative of a kind of bolstered inadequacy intrinsic to both the natural world and the poetic voice, and mitigated only by their shared utilization of each other. The reality is more expansive. Shelley is neither subjugating the natural world to the poetic voice nor emphasizing the latter’s inadequacy in the face of the former; rather, he is attempting to demonstrate the extent to which each can serve to aggrandize the other.

Earl R. Wasserman addressed the relationship between thought, language and landscape in the context of *Mont Blanc* in the following terms:

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<sup>11</sup> The text referenced throughout this chapter is the so-called HSW version of *Mont Blanc* and not the more recently discovered SDN version, located in 1976, as specified in the introductory essay to *Mont Blanc*. (Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat. New York: Norton, 2002.p. 96).

*Mont Blanc* opens, not, as we might reasonably expect, with a view of the mountain, but with a metaphoric definition of the universe in terms of the “intellectual philosophy”: “The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind.” Uncreated and eternal, the universe is a river of “things,” for mind can only perceive, not create; but what is asserted of the river is that it flows through the valley of the mind, for everything exists only as it is perceived and therefore only as it is present in the mind. By defining the universe as constituted of things rather than of thoughts and then by predicating the existence of those things exclusively in the mind, Shelley formulated a syntax which, by fusing the externalizing subject (universe of things) and the internalizing predicate (flows through the mind), denies both that “things” are mental fictions and that there is any real distinction between thing and thought.<sup>12</sup>

There is a Cartesian quality to this response to the opening of *Mont Blanc* that, though elegantly cohesive, carries the fusion between perception and physicality too far.<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly there exists no denial of the completeness and existence of “things” in Shelley’s lines but it might be argued that the objective of the poem is not to suggest a fusion of thought and thing so much as to explore its impossibility. Nowhere is the distinction between perception and that which is

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<sup>12</sup>Earl R. Wasserman. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971. p. 222.

<sup>13</sup>René Descartes. *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*. London: Penguin, 1998. pp. 44-45.

perceived more apparent than in the mysterious, oceanic silence of the one, and the aspirational language of the other.

The enigmatic, but strongly implicative, description of the “many-voiced vale” (13) is an early example of the co-existence, if not necessarily cooperation, of the innate, and non-linguistic, articulation of nature, and human, language-based, expression. The description encompasses the many sounds of the present expanse but simultaneously it functions as a reminder of the more intellectually concrete, and equally existent, poetic voice. It is a co-existence further explicated and attested to in the latter half of the stanza:

The caverns echoing to the Arve's commotion,  
A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;  
Thou art pervaded with the ceaseless motion,  
Thou art the path of that unresting sound. (30-33)

The “loud, lone sound no other sound can tame” offers a more explicit insight into the nature of the relationship between the natural world and the poetic voice that is, to a degree, exposed as one of hierarchy. Essentially, the poetic voice is attesting to its own limitations, acknowledging that, while it may affirm the magnitude and magnificence of nature, the mere fact of its doing so is not tantamount to a harnessing of the same. However, the hierarchy is a nuanced and unorthodox one insofar as this great natural force remains dependent upon the less ostensibly powerful poetic voice for its own articulation. Whatever this mysterious and unconquerable power may be, language is not intrinsic to it, and yet it cannot

be known except through language, even as language must concede its limitations in order to depict it.

The poetic voice, and therefore consciousness, meanwhile, is profoundly affected by the monumental power of nature, and the panorama to which it has been exposed:

I seem as in a trance sublime and strange  
To muse on my own separate phantasy  
My own, my human mind, which passively  
Now renders and receives fast influencings,  
Holding an unremitting interchange  
With the clear universe of things around ... (35-40)

It is the term “separate phantasy” that is most striking in these lines since it serves to illuminate the abyss between the reality of the physical world as it exists and its depiction once it is refracted first through the poetic consciousness, and finally through the poetic voice. It is a two-degree separation that we are not permitted to overlook: the autonomous, physical world filtered first through the human psyche and then through the human tongue. Although the poet testifies to his own passivity we are forced to acknowledge that the requisite perception and expression moves us farther away from objective truth and closer to the poet’s personal truth until the “clear universe of things” becomes unavoidably muddled by human participation. It is the nature of poetry considering the natural world that this process of transmission should move the poet farther from his inspiration,

since the relative “silence” of nature always remains inexorably subject to the interpretation and depiction of the idiosyncratic human psyche, a circumstance to which Shelley again bears witness in the third section when he speculates about the prehistory of the “scene” before him:

Is this the scene  
Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young  
Ruin? Were these their toys? Or did a sea  
Of fire, envelope once this silent snow?  
None can reply – all seems eternal now. (71-75)

The “None can reply” stands as a blunt, yet strangely thrilling, testimony to the ineluctable separation between poet and nature, thrilling because the void between them is more intricate than a simple, unanswered question might suggest. Once again we are reminded of the gulf manifested by the absence of a common language but Shelley goes on to affirm that there exists a mode and channel of communication between the poet and his subject,

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue  
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild  
So solemn, so serene, that man may be  
But for such faith with nature reconciled;  
Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal  
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
By all, but which the wise, the great, the good



Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel. (76-83)

Here, Shelley is outlining a difference between poet and subject, beyond the absence of a common language, a difference that is indicative of a subtler divergence. The coexistence of the separate assertions “Thou has a voice” and “none can reply” testifies again to the unconventionally expressive quality of silence in the natural world, while the “mysterious tongue” that “teaches awful doubt” calls our attention to the reality of this unconventional ‘language-less’ mode of communication between the poet and his subject that constitutes one of many recognitions throughout *Mont Blanc* of the substantive quality of silence.

A further distinction in this passage taps into the dichotomy between the emotions that are innate to the human psyche and those that occur naturally within the natural world, specifically, “faith”. Although this “faith so mild”, of which the poet speaks, is inspired in the human mind by nature it is, nonetheless, not organic to nature, but serves rather to widen the gap between the poet and his subject. Indeed, as Shelley affirms, “man may be / But for such faith with nature reconciled”. When one considers the fabric of faith, which, by definition, is dependent on the absence of a physical and provable actuality, its incongruity, and even impossibility, within the context of the physical world is illuminated. Faith is not intrinsic to nature, since nature is complete and sufficient within itself. Rather, this is an emotion born of the human psyche to fill a gap between perception and

comprehension and it is this gap that renders man and nature irreconcilable.<sup>14</sup> That Shelley should comprehend and espouse the profound self-sufficiency of the natural world, without viewing it as subject to a presiding theism, has a simultaneously mystical and concrete modernity. In his essay “ ‘Wholly Incommunicable Words’: Romantic expressions of the inexpressible”, Michael O’Neill (with specific allusion to the end of *Mont Blanc*) contextualizes the particular originality of this outlook in the Romantic movement:

This final “Silence, “ close yet opposed to the “vacancy” (144), depends on imaginings involving themselves with the star-beams and snowflakes intuited at the top of the mountain, material entities beyond language that are also turned by words into tokens of significance.

The notion of the inexpressible is hardly new to Romanticism; it has its roots deep in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. When Vaughan reports the surmise that there is in God a deep yet dazzling darkness, or Dante asserts in canto 1 of the *Paradiso* that “To pass beyond humanity may not be told in words” (70-1; translation from Temple Classics edition, 1904), they appeal – indirectly in Vaughan’s case, directly in Dante’s – to the conception. But for the Romantics, the inexpressible links with a more self-referring poetic eloquence, with a view of the poem as a place or space in which meanings and its processes enact themselves in

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<sup>14</sup> An account of Shelley’s intellectual passage to atheism, during his undergraduate years at Oxford, can be found in the Richard Holmes biography. (Richard Holmes. *Shelley*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975. pp. 37-60).

confidently or anxiously self-validating modes. Dante's humility in the face of what lies "beyond humanity" is accompanied by trenchant belief that it exists and can be, at least approximately, rendered.<sup>15</sup>

Shelley attempts no such rendering, nor does he seem guilty of the suspicion that the existence of a conscious instigator would aggrandize the empirical world. Rather he appears to demonstrate that its grandeur lies in its autonomy and not in the part it might have to play in a governing ideology. It is the beginning of the thought that the numinous may be independent of the divine.

It is in the fourth section that we see the most concrete example of what causes the insurmountable divide between mankind and the natural world:

All things that move and breathe with toil and sound  
Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell.  
Power dwells apart in its tranquillity  
Remote, serene, and inaccessible ... (94-97)

It is the word "inaccessible" that eradicates all possibility of equivalence here. Power, of the kind to which Shelley alludes, is not a human attribute and, indeed, the closest that the human psyche can come to annexing it is through an assertion of its existence. The human mind, mired as it is in the co-dependence and outward-reaching littleness of emotions such as "faith", is not a powerful thing,

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<sup>15</sup> Michael O'Neill. "'Wholly Incommunicable by Words': Romantic expressions of the inexpressible", *The Wordsworth Circle*, Volume XXXI, Number 1, Winter 2000. p. 16.

since power of this kind is autonomous from both language and emotion. As Shelley himself would have it:

Mont Blanc yet gleams on high: - the power is there,  
The still and solemn power of many sights,  
And many sounds, and much of life and death. (127-129)

It is significant that the culmination of the poem, specifically and repeatedly, addresses the condition of silence in nature, which is not fashioned out of the same fabric as human silence:

Winds contend  
Silently there, and heap the snow with breath  
Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home  
The voiceless lightning in these solitudes  
Keeps innocently ... (134-138)

This is not a silence of nothingness, or of the absence of expression, but rather it is silence that attests to a different kind of expression; it is a silence that attests to power. Thus it is not a human-made silence but, instead, a silence that the human mind may strive to uncover the expressiveness of and, indeed, this is the task that the poet has set himself in *Mont Blanc*. The power of nature is beyond humanity, but humanity may evolve the power to comprehend and express what it can, necessarily, never generate. As Shelley himself has it:

what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind's imaginings

Silence and solitude were vacancy? (142-144)

In the previous lines he asserts that “Its home / The voiceless lightning in these solitudes / Keeps innocently” (137-138). “Innocently” is a word that carries with it a flavour of the implicitly judgmental, the implication being that if the voiceless lightning is innocent, then the voice of the poet is comparatively corrupt. It may seem a peculiar thing for a poetic voice to affirm its own impurity but that is precisely what Shelley appears to intend. There is profound purity in the impulse to express and unravel the mysteries of the natural world but it is of a kind that must inevitably expose the poet’s own otherness to himself. Shelley himself at the conclusion of “A Defence of Poetry” described poets as, “the hierophants of an unapprehend inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves.”<sup>16</sup> Wherever the poet ventures, there is a sense of antagonism and incongruity but, for Shelley, that would seem to be precisely the sense that renders the poet a fit inhabitant of such places.

As we have already ascertained, the human consciousness and, as such, human expression has been divorced from nature by virtue of its advocacy of the unnatural, since emotions such as faith are not, in a highly literal sense, naturally occurring. Between the poetic voice and the voiceless power of nature, therefore,

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<sup>16</sup>“A Defence of Poetry”. Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat. New York: Norton, 2002.p. 535.

there exists a man-made abyss of incongruity. Thus we see the poetic voice indict itself in a manner that seems to define the language and expression out of which it is constructed as little more than a failed silence. It is what we have *instead* of nature's silence, all that remains when the power is gone, and the closest that we may come to a reunion with that silent power is to stand as a noisy testimony to it. However, the argument is not tidy enough to end here since Shelley never quite permits us to overlook the fact that imagination is, uniquely, the province of humankind. All such interpretations emanate from "the human mind's imaginings" (143), which possess their own brand of purity, insofar as they cannot be replicated or corrupted by what serves to inspire them. The poet may not attain the lofty reaches of nature's power but Shelley seems to suggest that he is no stranger to spiritual elevation, a thought that stands as another brick in the wall separating the transcendent from the canonically divine.

At this point, it is necessary to further consider the full reach and triangular implications of the question of "faith" in *Mont Blanc* and its depiction in the latter half of the third section of the poem.

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue  
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild  
So solemn, so serene, that man may be  
But for such faith with nature reconciled;  
Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal  
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood

By all, but which the wise, the great, the good

Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel. (76-83)

It is difficult, at this juncture, not to make specific reference to Shelley's atheism, particularly in light of the fact that the poet, in his own, non-doctrinal fashion, may nonetheless be described as a profoundly religious individual.<sup>17</sup> This emphasis on a non-doctrinal mode of quasi-religious intimation must remain paramount in our understanding of Shelley's own particular spirituality and it is worth noting that he authored *Mont Blanc*, in part, as a direct response to Coleridge's "Hymn Before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouny", a poem that affirms that God is responsible for such magnificent natural landscapes.<sup>18</sup> Harold Bloom also notes that, "Shelley is a prophetic and religious poet whose passionate convictions are agnostic"<sup>19</sup>.

This intense ambivalence is not mirrored by Coleridge in his poem, which immediately lays itself open to the suspicion of a more theistic understanding of the same landscape through the employment of the word "Hymn" in the title.

Ye living flowers that skirt the eternal frost!

Ye wild goats sporting round the eagle's nest!

Ye eagles, play-mates of the mountain-storm!

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<sup>17</sup> Shelley's poetic infatuation with the source of consciousness and power is one that bears all the hallmarks and fervency of religious fanaticism, albeit without the traditional doctrinal superstition. It is an infatuation that is demonstrated and explicated throughout both *Mont Blanc* and *Alastor*. (Michael O'Neill, "'A Double Face of False and True': Poetry and Religion in Shelley", in *Literature and Theology* 25 (2011). pp. 32-46).

<sup>18</sup> Introductory essay to *Mont Blanc*. Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat. New York: Norton, 2002.p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> Harold Bloom. "Urbanity and Apocalypse." *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. New York: W.W Norton & Co, 2002. pp. 568-570.

Ye lightnings, the dread arrows of the clouds  
Ye signs and wonders of the element!  
Utter forth God, and fill the hills with praise!

Thou too, hoar Mount! with thy sky-pointing peaks,  
Oft from whose feet the avalanche, unheard,  
Shoots downward, glittering through the pure serene  
Into the depths of clouds, that veil thy breast –  
Thou too again, stupendous Mountain! thou  
That as I raise my head, awhile bowed low  
In adoration, upward from thy base  
Slow travelling with dim eyes suffused with tears,  
Solemnly seemest, like a vapoury cloud,  
To rise before me – Rise, O ever rise,  
Rise like a cloud of incense from the Earth!  
Thou kingly Spirit throned among the hills,  
Thou dread ambassador from Earth to Heaven,  
Great Hierarch! tell thou the silent sky,  
And tell the stars, and tell yon rising sun,  
Earth, with her thousand voices, praises God. (64-85)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Coleridge's Poetry And Prose*. Ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimonda Modiano. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.



The almost hysterical profusion of exclamation marks in the penultimate section certainly has a hymn-like quality, insofar as the enthusiasm nearly obscures the intended message and propels the reader into autopilot. But the assertion that the elements “utter forth God, and fill the hills with praise” should not be overlooked, since it is almost the reverse of the “Large codes of fraud and woe” (81) that Shelley’s mountains – and they are the *same* mountains – “repeal” (80). For Coleridge, the magnificence of the natural world serves as a more voluble trumpet for a pre-existing ideology; for Shelley, they are its stumbling block. Coleridge’s response provides contours for the imagination that Shelley could not permit. Essentially, he (Coleridge) forces it to reside in an already inhabited and well-travelled space while, for Shelley, the imagination may render populous and substantive that which is traditionally understood to be vacated, “Silence and solitude” (144). It is interesting to note that Coleridge’s particular diction is almost Roman Catholic in nature with the use of words like “incense” and an emphasis on hierarchy and “throned” imagery, a very different kind of hierarchy than that implied by Shelley’s depiction of the human mind as a translator of nature’s power. This grandiosity seems to be inspired by the landscape itself, rather than anything we know of Coleridge’s own religious convictions, and the God that he enjoins nature to praise with all “her thousand voices” (85) is never given a specific denomination. The key point, however, is this sense of hierarchy, and of nature utilizing language in order to espouse a human system of belief. For all their agreement on the potent silence of the same landscape, Coleridge’s “God”

and Shelley's imagination could never be interchangeable. Robert M. Ryan encapsulates the increased scope of the latter's interpretation well in his suggestion that in, "Observing a kind of Blakean dialectic, Shelley expresses the paradox that atheism allows religious speculation a kind of spontaneity and freedom that would be denied any formal creed."<sup>21</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle also suggests that Shelley, "in his mature works" tried to replace "God's Power... with his own mode of expression, his own "voice" seeking to "repeal" religious "codes of fraud and woe".<sup>22</sup> The comparative maturity of *Mont Blanc* is a thought we shall return to during a consideration of *Alastor*, since that poem never quite exits the realm of spirituality to address religion frankly and specifically.

Remaining with the theme of religion, considered one way, *Mont Blanc* functions as a poetic account of what might be termed a variation on the biblical fall in Genesis 3, where religion, rather than knowledge, separates mankind, irrevocably, from a natural paradise.<sup>23</sup> The poem stands as a testimony to the magnitude and magnetism of the natural world, which is depicted so as to suggest its capacity to extract a kind of religious awe from the observing individual. The resulting possible effect is dual in nature, either to inspire an "awful doubt", literally meaning "full of awe", in the face of a magnificence grounded firmly in the physical world, with no dimension dependent on superstition, or, to provoke a

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<sup>21</sup> Robert M. Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. p. 221.

<sup>22</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle. *Shelley's Process*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Genesis 3: 6-7, *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. New York: Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1959.

softer, less insidious, manifestation of the kind of “faith” that *is* inspired by superstition. As Shelley affirms, the “great mountain” has “a voice” with which to “repeal large codes of fraud and woe” and yet the failure of the human mind lies in the probability that the eradication of one false idol may merely result in a reassignment of the feeling formerly elicited by it to the emancipating alternative. Thus humankind and nature remain insurmountably irreconcilable, since the two emotions that nature provokes in the human consciousness, “doubt” and “faith”, are a diminished and diminishing infliction upon the organic and autonomous natural world. Such emotions, after all, are a testimony to the incomplete sense of selfhood that nature does not share with man.

There is a poignant futility to the conclusion of the extract when it alludes to the “codes of fraud and woe; not understood / By all, but which the wise, the great, the good / Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.” It is hard to believe that Shelley is alluding to anything other than organized religion in this reference to the “codes of fraud and woe” but the affirmation extends only as far as the possibility that the voice nature has to offer might be employed for such a purpose. The focus remains on human agency and our capacity to comprehend what it is that we are hearing. It is not nature’s responsibility to channel its language-less utterances in a fashion that renders them fathomable. Rather, it is the responsibility of the human mind, and the human imagination, to fine-tune its faculties and translate this “voice” into feeling. Essentially, Shelley is articulating the purpose and value of an enigma: that it must be deciphered by the person who encounters it

in order to retain a potency that would be lost if the deciphering were not required. If the natural world is a challenge to the imagination, then poetry is Shelley's reply.

O'Neill writes the following of Shelley's observation in "A Defence of Poetry" that, "all original religions are allegorical or susceptible of allegory, and like Janus have a double face of false and true".<sup>24</sup>

In his arresting phrase, 'a double face of false and true', Shelley suggests that what is 'true' about 'all original religions' links with their susceptibility to 'allegory', that is, to some kind of non-literal mode of understanding, and with their 'partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world'. The formulation implies that there is 'an invisible world' with 'agencies' which religion does it best to apprehend, but does so only 'partially'. To grant as much is to concede a great deal, and shows how Shelley's career involves a constantly shifting view of the relationship between poetry and religion. He is a pivotal figure for any reflections on poetry and belief because he represents a cultural development of great significance, emerging as a chief exemplar of that moment when Romanticism explicitly secularises religion, when poetry discovers and celebrates its onerous,

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<sup>24</sup>"A Defence of Poetry". Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman, and Neil Fraistat. New York: Norton, 2002.p. 511.

significant role as unmasker of the claims of dogma and metaphorically self-aware hierophant of the poetics of belief.<sup>25</sup>

In the context of *Mont Blanc* it seems possible to substitute the word “unhearable” for “invisible”. The profundity of the silence that Coleridge channels into dogma-generated praise cannot be contracted in such a fashion by Shelley. And yet religion has its part to play, insofar as it may patrol the boundaries between the empirical and the longing for the numinous. It is the province of poetry, however, to transcend this boundary, which Shelley seems to have recognized to be in some way the instrument of its own eradication, and arrive at the numinous through a fusion of the most that nature and humanity have to offer. It is a thought that seems to carry with it a certain scientific prescience, as though in vague consciousness of the extent to which the expanses of the heavens should come to eclipse the fire of the burning bush.<sup>26</sup>

Continuing with *Mont Blanc* we must also note that the insidious and self-belittling impulse towards either “faith” or “doubt” appears to stem from the teachings of the wilderness’s “mysterious tongue”. It is a specification that seems to implicate language in that particular kind of treason. In contrast, the “human mind’s imaginings” come from a place of “silence”. Without wishing to extrapolate too much from this association of faith with sound, and imagination

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<sup>25</sup> Michael O’Neill. “‘A Double Face of False and True’: Poetry and Religion in Shelley”, *Literature and Theology* 25 (2011).

<sup>26</sup> Exodus 3:2. *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. New York: Collins’ Clear-Type Press, 1959.

with silence, the implication does seem to tend toward the notion that imagination is what is generated in the human mind by nature, while faith is what the human mind inflicts upon it. As already suggested, the human attribute that Shelley consistently abstains from discrediting in *Mont Blanc* is imagination, since it is through this that the poetic consciousness is able to recognize and comprehend the power of the natural world. Rather than attempting to subjugate nature to its own limitations the imagination endeavours to rise to the challenge that is posed by it and even to annex a transcendence of its own. It is an impulse to which Wordsworth testifies in Book VI of *The Prelude* when he declares that he, “Beheld the summit of Mont Blanc, and griev’d / To have a soulless image on the eye / Which had usurp’d upon a living thought / That never more could be:” (525-528).<sup>27</sup> As William Keach observes, Shelley’s is a “poem which raises fundamental questions about the mind’s power and limitations.”<sup>28</sup>

Keach’s essay deals primarily with the importance of form in *Mont Blanc*, a consideration that is both profoundly pertinent within the context of the interactive relationship between silence and the poetic voice, and the affiliation of silence and “power” in the natural world. The relentless immensity of this naturally occurring power seems sustained by the forward momentum of the poem’s structure and the repetition of certain, significant consonants and vowel sounds. Nowhere is the carefully constructed alliterative quality more noticeable than in the final stanza

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<sup>27</sup> William Wordsworth. *The Prelude*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970.

<sup>28</sup> William Keach. “Mont Blanc.” Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat. New York: Norton, 2002.p. 671.

where “s” seems to function as a recurrent, phonetic tic. “The still and solemn power of many sights / And many sounds” (128-129) acts almost as a prelude to the substantive “Silence and solitude” at which the poem finally, and expansively, arrives. Indeed, the cadence of *Mont Blanc*, and particularly the final section, has an oceanic quality to it, a rolling and rhapsodic arrangement punctuated by that ubiquitous, almost prophetic, single consonant. Comparably, we have the recurrent, elongating vowel sound of “snow” (74), and “now” (75), and the thrice repeated “so” (77-78) in the latter half of the third section, as well as the similarly lengthy “ow” in the double use of “power” (127-128) and the single use of “sounds” (129) at the opening of the concluding section. The effect, ultimately, is to engender an impression of something larger than human rhetoric in the poem’s substance.

The question of rhyme in *Mont Blanc* is one that Keach contextualizes well:

[Shelley’s] decision some six years earlier that *Mont Blanc* was a wonder worthy of rhyme presents a much more challenging formal situation. Shelley’s own note says that *Mont Blanc* ‘rests its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untameable wilderness and inaccessible solemnity from which [his] feelings sprang.’ ‘Untameable wilderness’ and ‘inaccessible solemnity’, without and within, both suggest that blank verse might have been the appropriate form for this subject. Wordsworth (in *The Prelude*), Coleridge (in the ‘Hymn Before Sun-rise in the Vale of Chamouny’) – and John Hollander too (in a wonderful parody of

Shelley's poem called 'Mount Blank') – all write about *Mont Blanc* in blank verse. But Shelley's poem, while creating the impression of blank verse with its massive periods and very frequent enjambment, uses rhyme in its 'attempt to imitate' an experience of the untameable and inaccessible. Why?

The facts about rhyme in *Mont Blanc* are in themselves striking, particularly when measured against what must have been one of Shelley's formal models, Milton's *Lycidas*. Of the 144 lines in *Mont Blanc*, only three end in words which have no rhyme elsewhere in the poem. Three of the 193 lines in *Lycidas* are also unrhymed... Even more curiously, there are eleven instances in *Mont Blanc* of words rhyming with themselves (usually over long stretches of verse), and in three of these eleven instances the same word appears in rhyming position not twice but three times.<sup>29</sup>

If, therefore, we are to consider *Mont Blanc* as, essentially, blank verse with "something extra" then what conclusions are we to draw from this partial and, apparently very deliberate, introduction of rhyme into the equation? How exactly does rhyme function so as to convey this sense of the "untameable" and "inaccessible"? Keach would have it that the use of rhyme is Shelley's attempt to elevate understanding through the imposition of an arbitrary, but functional, "order

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<sup>29</sup> William Keach. "Mont Blanc." Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat. New York: Norton, 2002.pp. 669-670.



of language”, a conclusion that is elegant enough to be unavoidably elusive.<sup>30</sup> To begin with the desire to convey the “untameable” it must be acknowledged that rhyme does appear an unusual choice. Rhyme, after all, is a regulated poetic technique that would rather appear to tame a poem’s subject and tenor than otherwise. This, however, is where the specific style of rhyme utilized in *Mont Blanc* becomes pertinent. It is unobtrusive, understated, even covert, in its execution, carrying the resonance of rhyme without drawing undue attention to the existence of it. It is a subtly imposed means of elevating the impression of the natural world without appearing to inflict the *unnatural* act of rhyme upon it. Simultaneously, its use brings a kind of continuous, even circular, quality to *Mont Blanc* that is further bolstered by the lyrical and insistent enjambment.

and does the mightier world of sleep  
 Spread far around and inaccessibly  
 Its circles? (55-57)

This particular example of enjambment, in terms of content, seems to encapsulate the specific philosophy of rhyme in *Mont Blanc*. Certainly, the effect is both “untameable” and “inaccessible” since the rhapsodic and surging rhetoric of the poem draws minimal attention to what rendered it so. Rather it appears to exist organically, almost as a manifestation of its own subject, a fact that lends credence

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<sup>30</sup> William Keach. “Mont Blanc.” Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat. New York: Norton, 2002. pp. 669-670.

to the intended depiction of the unique and all-encompassing power of the natural world.

In *Mont Blanc*, therefore, we have an example of language constructed so as to appear organic but what relationship does this “unnaturally natural” language have with the immense and unconquerable silence upon which it is founded? The fact that every poem begins and ends with silence is an insufficient observation within the context of *Mont Blanc* since the relationship between silence and language, in this poem, is intensely personal. Sound has not simply come out of silence; it has been directly inspired by it. Let us recollect the opening of the poem, which affirms that,

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark – now glittering – now reflecting gloom –  
Now lending splendour, where from the secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters, - with a sound but half its own, (1-6)

It is this language-less, “everlasting universe” flowing through the human “mind” that is the “source of human thought” and, consequently, of human language. The “sound but half its own”, therefore, becomes an intriguingly oxymoronic concept insofar as it is literally the sound of silence. It is this ‘silent sound’ that enables and generates the language of the poem, and its role as a fountainhead for language is articulated at the opening of *Mont Blanc* and explicated at its close,

The secret strength of things  
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome  
Of heaven is a law, inhabits thee!  
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind's imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy? (139-144)

This resolution is less purely reverential than the opening specification of nature's silently evocative power. Once again we have the assertion that it "governs thought" and yet the question posed is tantamount to a challenge to nature's silence. The "And what were thou" in conjunction with the word "vacancy" carries a charge of suggestion. Essentially, Shelley is implying that, without the component of human imagination and expression, "silence and solitude" themselves might *be* "vacancy" or, at the very least, might as well be. Much of this consideration of *Mont Blanc* has been grounded in the notion of the dependence of human language on nature's silence for its inspiration and qualification and yet this resolution affirms a more nuanced pact of mutual definition. Language no longer stands as the lone dependant since here we are confronted with the hypothesis that, without language, silence too could not exist in quite the fashion that it does.

Ultimately, the objective for which *Mont Blanc* serves as an extraordinary vehicle seems to be something akin to a search for the precise nature of the relationship between sound and silence, the power of nature and the poetic voice.

This questing tenor is nowhere more explicitly evident in Shelley's poetry than in *Alastor*, or *The Spirit of Solitude*. Shelley actually composed *Alastor* the year before *Mont Blanc* – the former was written in 1815 and the latter in 1816 – and in this earlier example we encounter a more obviously searching architecture in the young poet's pursuit of the supernatural, or "strange truths in undiscovered lands" (77).<sup>31</sup> *Alastor* not only turns upon the same axis as *Mont Blanc* but it can also be said to share a common objective with it, since the relationship between the poetic voice and the natural world once again functions as the impetus for this poem's existence and, like all poems, though more fervently than some, *Alastor* is trying to establish the reasons behind why it exists. If we are to advocate Jamie McKendrick's observation that, "Every poem is an answer to the question what is poetry for.", then it may be fair to observe that *Alastor* offers a more comprehensive and structurally literal response than most, while losing none of the expansiveness of *Mont Blanc*.<sup>32</sup>

In *Mont Blanc* we considered the question of silence within the context of Shelley's illumination of the complex coexistence of mutual dependence, and insurmountable division, that is manifested between nature and the human imagination and language. Ultimately, the reader is confronted with the recognition that the fabric of what one might term "human-made" silence is distinct from the silence that is generated by, and intrinsic to, the natural world.

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<sup>31</sup> Introduction to *Alastor*. Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman, and Neil Fraistat New York: Norton, 2002.p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> Jamie McKendrick The South Bank Show, October 1994.

Furthermore, while the former may attest to the latter, it lacks the elemental condition required to generate it. Thus, the impetus for *Mont Blanc* could be described as a more modest one than that of *Alastor*, since *Mont Blanc* seeks only to demonstrate the distinction while *Alastor* presents us with a persona whose objective is to discover and even transcend it.

In *Mont Blanc* we saw an attestation to the “power” of nature, which is presented as a kind of transcendent, non-religious and organic spirituality.<sup>33</sup> The uniqueness of this “power” lies in its welding of two apparently fundamental opposites, the natural and the supernatural. It is this realm of the “naturally supernatural” to which the narrator in *Alastor* is alluding when he speaks of his desire to fathom this “unfathomable world” (18).<sup>34</sup> The use of the term “world” is essential here insofar as it solidifies the hypothesis that the transcendence, which the narrator speaks of annexing, is grounded in his specific cosmos. It is not a world *beyond* the natural world to which his understanding aspires; rather, his ambition is to penetrate the purest and most powerful depths of our own world, via the “Poet[’s]” odyssey, and thus become united with the supernatural verity that is, paradoxically, its most natural state. Therefore, when considering the function of silence in *Alastor* it is essential to keep in mind, first, the narrator’s desire for his

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<sup>33</sup> Religion, being a man-made phenomenon, cannot be the “power” that Shelley alludes to. Indeed, the human emotions primarily associated with religion, specifically “faith”, are depicted as widening the chasm between the human psyche and the natural world.

<sup>34</sup> Earl R. Wasserman in his essay “The “Poetry of Skepticism” alludes to Shelley’s use of the “Visionary” and “Narrator” poets in *Alastor*, a technique that he contends was designed to illuminate the existence of “two kinds of poetry: the inhuman, unvital, and possibly futile ideal and the tragic, disappointing human.” (Earl R. Wasserman. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971. pp. 11-12).

consciousness to transcend the exclusively human - “Hoping to still these obstinate questionings... / to render up the tale / Of what we are” (26-29) - and, second, the notion that a coexistence of two apparent opposites may be entirely elemental. I have said “exclusively human” and yet the impulse might more accurately be described as a desire to uncover that which is “most human”, the paradox being that this state of purity and authenticity in human consciousness is, necessarily, not “solely human”. Ultimately, this is a poem where the simultaneity of apparent opposites is fertile and intrinsic, and the simultaneity of silence and sound is essential to both the conveyance of the supernatural element of the natural world and the realization of the purest extremity of the human psyche.

From the first descriptive passage of the opening verse paragraph we are presented with an image or, more accurately, a sensation, of the “tingling silence” (7), which qualifying adjective sets the scene for a substantive and interactive quality of silence throughout the poem. The second verse paragraph goes on to speak of the, “lone and silent hours, / When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness, / Like an inspired and desperate alchemist” (29-31). Here we see the first allusion to the creative force that appears to be a by-product of the aforementioned coexisting opposites. The use of the word “alchymist”, in relation to the night constructing a “sound” out of “stillness”, is conspicuous since it is a term that denotes the pursuit of a transcendent, but unattainable, ambition. While logic dictates that sound and silence, necessarily, eradicate each other the narrator, contradictorily, suggests that the coexistence of the two serves to create a deeper

and more complex condition. Thus, it could be said that the two opening verse paragraphs are punctuated with suggestions of the kind of state to which the narrator aspires and for which the “Poet”, to whom we are introduced in the fourth verse paragraph, is searching. Indeed, the narrator offers a surprisingly concrete elucidation of the fabric of this objective when he affirms:

I wait thy breath, Great Parent, that my strain  
May modulate with murmurs of the air,  
And the motions of the forest and the sea,  
And the voice of living beings, and woven hymns  
Of night and day, and the deep heart of man. (45-49)

This is nothing less than a specific allusion to the kind of harmony and fusion between the questing individual and the natural world to which the narrator aspires, and within which he believes the secrets of the uncorrupted human condition to be contained. It is significant that he refers to the “voice of living beings, and woven hymns / Of night and day, and the deep heart of man” since it recalls to us the dichotomous configuration of man and nature, language and silence, while simultaneously amalgamating them. It is also worth noting that the “Great Parent” to whom he addresses these lines is the “Mother of this unfathomable world!” (18) or, to utilize a more generic label, Mother Nature.

The advent of the Poet in the fourth stanza expands upon the essential contradiction of coexisting assimilation and segregation between man and nature. We are told that, “No human hands with pious reverence reared” (51) his “tomb”

(50) but rather “the charmed eddies of autumnal winds / Built o’er his mouldering bones a pyramid of mouldering leaves in the waste wilderness” (52-54). It is a vertiginous amalgamation of association and disassociation. Humankind and their “pious reverence” or, more specifically, religion, are sectioned off from the Poet while he, though still a human, is identified with the natural world to the extent that the same adjective (“mouldering”) is applied to both his “bones” and the “leaves” that cover them. It is a pleasing paradox wherein the corruption of flesh is depicted as its most uncorrupted state, insofar as decay renders human physicality a component of nature.

The paragraph escalates into an assertion that, “He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude” (60), an observation that cannot fail to recall us to the culmination of *Mont Blanc*, particularly in light of the fact that the concluding two lines affirm that, “Silence, too enamoured of that voice, / Locks its mute music in her rugged cell” (65-66). Once again we have the ‘Silence’ and the ‘solitude’, which we have come to recognize as the pure and paramount condition of the natural world. The assertion is that the Poet’s voice has been absorbed into this state in the requisite contradictory fashion, attested to by the phrase, “mute music”. However, it is worth considering that Shelley has, on this occasion, attributed a human emotion to a personification of “Silence”. Thus we see the Poet growing more synonymous with nature and more emancipated from humanity while, conversely, the natural world is domesticated by a human impulse. It is a contradiction that seems also to be encapsulated by the unusual term “rugged cell”, a description that



simultaneously denotes wildness and constriction. Indeed, the entire concept appears indicative of the battle and balance between nature and humanity, sound and silence, which is at once dependent and autonomous, mutually perpetuating and mutually annihilating. The embryonic impetus for *Mont Blanc* is undoubtedly in evidence, less nuanced, but identifiable and the allusion to “Every sight / And sound” (68-69), in the opening lines of the fifth verse paragraph, recalls us forcefully to the final verse paragraph of *Mont Blanc*, which likewise opens with a reference to “The still and solemn power of many sights, / And many sounds” (128-129).

The impulse on the part of the Poet to transcend his own humanity and identify himself completely with nature and the naturally transcendent engenders, if not disdain for the human sphere and human company than, at least obliviousness to it. We might consider his reaction to the “Arab maiden” (129) or, more accurately, his complete lack of a reaction to her, in the seventh verse paragraph.

Meanwhile an Arab maiden brought his food,  
Her daily portion, from her father’s tent,  
And spread her matting for his couch, and stole  
From her duties and repose to tend his steps: -  
Enamoured, yet not daring for deep awe  
To speak her love: - and watched his nightly sleep,  
Sleepless herself, to gaze upon his lips

Parted in slumber, whence the regular breath  
Of innocent dreams arose: then, when red morn  
Made paler the pale moon, to her cold home  
Wildered, and wan, and panting, she returned. (129-139)

The Poet, bent upon his search for the numinous, seems unable to register anything manifested in the exclusively human sphere and, without so much as acknowledging the maiden's presence, he wanders on "through Arabia / And Persia" (140-141). Such complete indifference to even the most tender human ministering is suggestive of a latent recognition on the part of the Poet that, in order to attain the state of consciousness to which he aspires, he must eschew all human contact and communication, lest it elicit the kind of emotions that widen the gap between his current condition and the transcendence he seeks. It is a thought Somerset Maugham addresses, with infinitely more violence, in his 1919 novel *The Moon and Sixpence* through the character of Charles Strickland (the novel's resident genius and stand-in for the painter Paul Gauguin), who expresses his horror for domestic, feminine ministerings, and the extent to which they are designed to cripple the creative soul, "With infinite patience she prepared to snare and bind me. She wanted to bring me down to her level; she cared nothing for me, she only wanted me to be hers. She was willing to do everything in the world for me except the one thing I wanted: to leave me alone."<sup>35</sup> There is a vengeful quality to this later protestation that forms an unsavoury contrast with the simple

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<sup>35</sup> W. Somerset Maugham. *The Moon And Sixpence*. New York: Penguin Books. 1944.

indifference of its Shelleyan predecessor, but the two instances are fashioned out of the fabric of the same fear. In both cases we see the prerequisite nature of “Silence and Solitude” and the necessity of distancing oneself from the solely human.

The scenario with the Arab maiden is rendered the more significant in light of the Poet’s vision of the “veiled maid” (151) in the subsequent verse paragraph, who is depicted as his female counterpart: “Her voice was like the voice of his own soul / ... Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme, / And lofty hopes of divine liberty, / Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy, / Herself a poet,” (153-161). The proximity of this dream-based encounter, and his real-life exposure to the Arab maiden, makes a comparison and even identification of the one with the other, unavoidable. Indeed, the specification that the maiden in the Poet’s dream is “veiled” seems deliberately reminiscent of the garb associated with Arab females of that era.<sup>36</sup> The most significant aspect of the comparison, however, is that the “vision” (149) female speaks to the Poet, a circumstance that contrasts strongly with the behaviour of her corporeal counterpart: “a veiled maid / Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones” (151-152). More than any other juxtaposition presented throughout *Alastor*, this contrast serves to illuminate the apparent irreconcilability of the exclusively human with the power and purity of the natural world. It would appear that there is the danger of a reductive quality

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Ferber’s affirms in his essay “Alastor” that, “It is hard to resist, meanwhile, the sense that the dream-maiden is a ‘return of the repressed’, as Freudians say, a version of the Arab maid herself.” (Michael Ferber, “Alastor”. Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat New York: Norton, 2002.p. 657).

manifesting in language that is not filtered through, or inflected by, a non-human element. What the Poet seeks is not to be found within humanity and thus he overlooks the human romantic possibility that presents itself to him and arrives instead at the realization that his human ideal is, necessarily, intangible. Once again we have the engenderment of transcendence through paradox and it is an impression that is enforced by the sometimes viscerally physical representation of the female vision. Allusions to the “eloquent blood”, “sinuous veil” and “panting bosom”, which would normally carry heavily corporeal connotations, remain suitably ethereal, since they are manifested in a phantasmal entity.

The following verse paragraph seems also to affirm the extent to which the Poet has sought to distance himself from the solely human through the surprisingly stark assertion that, “The spirit of sweet human love has sent / A vision to the sleep of him who spurned / Her choicest gifts” (203-205). This explication seems to mark a turning point in the poem, and in the Poet’s quest, insofar as the equilibrium of his objective is irretrievably disrupted. His pursuit of a superlative state of consciousness becomes confused with his desire to recapture the more human romantic affinity that his vision illuminated. It is a confusion that pervades until the poem’s conclusion, since the Poet seems to simultaneously seek to plumb the secret depths of the natural world for its own sake, while also attempting to recapture his lost vision through it, “ ‘Vision and Love!’ / The poet cried aloud, ‘I have beheld / The path of thy departure. Sleep and death / Shall not divide us long!’ ” (366-368). The implications of this confusion, and the Poet’s ultimate

demise, are unsettling though not unjust or unnatural. It is as though there is a price to be paid for eschewing the human condition, human capacities and concerns, when you are, in fact, a member of the human race. The decline of the Poet's appearance seems to stand as the affirmation of the subtle revenge taken by our ineluctable humanity:

And now his limbs were lean; his scattered hair

Served by the autumn of strange suffering

Sung dirges in the wind; his listless hand

Hung like dead bone within its withered skin. (248-251)

The "strange suffering" that the poet experiences also appears to be born out of the opposing nature of his two desires, the one grounded in human emotion and the other attainable only through an absolute emancipation from, and incapacity for, such impulses. Ultimately, the Poet does succeed in penetrating the farthest and most undisturbed depths of nature - "One step, / One human step alone, has ever broken / The stillness of its solitude: - one voice / Alone inspired its echoes;" (588-591) – but what awaits him, once he has done so, is death. As for the "voice" that seems almost to have summoned him, "floating among the winds" (592), it is not immediately clear whether we are supposed to understand it to be the elemental call that initially compelled the Poet to "seek strange truths in undiscovered lands" (77) or whether it is the "voice stifled in tremulous sobs" (164) of his "'Vision and Love'" (366). The fact of the voice being carried by the wind seems to indicate a version of the "great Mountain" (80) of *Mont Blanc*,

since it is fused with a natural phenomenon, but the fact of such a voice not already being a dimension of the previously un-penetrated arrival bolsters the interpretation that it is the Vision. Ultimately, the element of doubt feels deliberate, and designed to indicate the extent to which the initial purity and objective of the Poet's question suffered a change of subject. There is a faint similarity between the figure of the Poet and Sir Galahad, insofar as both are required to live a virginal existence in order to remain pure enough to achieve their distinct but superlative objectives. The Poet is, arguably, pursuing a variation of the Grail quest and its metamorphosis into an obsession with relocating a female Vision suffused with sexual imagery seems to fracture and redirect the original ambition. It may be that Shelley is suggesting that there is both a cost for the audacity to pursue the elemental condition that the Poet's originally sought, and a punishment for a wavering allegiance to it. A perfect fusion with the natural world, after all, requires an abdication of the human component, which would fulfil the farthest reaches of imagination only at the same moment as it eradicated it. Such a longing may be intrinsic to the composition of poetry but its complete success would leave poetry orphaned. There is a comparative maturity of compromise in *Mont Blanc*, which is satisfied with a language-based attestation to the numinous. Ultimately poetry and language are the means by which humanity may vicariously experience transcendence without paying the ultimate penalty of self-annihilation. It may seem peculiar to have considered these two great poems in reverse chronological order but I submit that an exposure to the elevated realism

and maturity of *Mont Blanc* is useful for an illumination of the more muddled and quixotic purity of *Alastor*.

When considering the “Arab maiden” and the Poet’s “vision” I made reference to the fact that it was only the latter who spoke to the Poet, but what of the instances throughout *Alastor* when the Poet himself speaks? There are, in fact, only three occasions. The first occurs in the thirteenth verse paragraph when the Poet encounters a swan:

“Thou hast a home,  
Beautiful bird; thou voyagest to thine home,  
Where thy sweet mate will twine her downy neck  
With thine, and welcome thy return with eyes  
Bright in the luster of their own fond joy.  
And what am I that I should linger here,  
With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,  
Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned  
To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers  
In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven  
That echoes not my thoughts?” (280-290)

The speech seems to represent a temporary loss of faith in the validity of his quest. The rather disparaging allusions to the “deaf air” and “blind earth” – an attributing of human disabilities to the natural world – and the acknowledgment of his disunity with his surroundings in the reference to the “heaven / That echoes not

my thoughts” all serve to suggest that we have arrived at the traditional epoch of doubt, in self and objective, that seems to occur in any literarily enshrined quest. The passage is prophetic, of Hermann Hesse’s *The Journey to the East*, a novella that addresses the consequences of just such a pivotal moment, and how its hallmarks may be recognized.<sup>37</sup>

As well as romantic melancholy, doubtless generated by a preoccupation with his “Vision”, the Poet’s speech is also saturated in the sadness of displacement. This is an individual who seems, at least subconsciously, to have been searching for the home he never authentically inhabited. The surroundings into which he was born were inharmonious to his consciousness and thus a part of what compelled him to seek a sense of oneness elsewhere. This search for a feeling of belonging is suffused with a kind of hysterical hopefulness that makes the ultimate resolution of the poem tantamount to a betrayal of hope itself. It may be that Shelley intended us to see the Poet as emblematic of any individual with a mind nuanced enough to recognize its own incongruity, but also passionate enough to retain a quixotic belief that somewhere there exists a solution, whether it be fashioned out of love, harmony or transcendence.

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<sup>37</sup>*The Journey to the East* is a narrative of an old man’s reminiscences of a thwarted journey undertaken by a mysterious League towards Asia. It was an expedition that was supposed to result in each individual member attaining their hearts’ desire, in the case of the author, the beautiful Princess Fatima. The narrator is unable to understand what caused the unravelling of the endeavour until he is revisited by a former associate by the name of Leo, who reveals to him that the disintegration of the League was the fault of the narrator’s own loss of faith. As with *Alastor*, the journey is more allegorical than literal. (Hermann Hesse. *The Journey To The East*. New York: Noonday Press, 1957.)



The aftermath of the speech escalates into a self-annihilating impulse that seems, initially, to conquer the Poet:

desperate hope convulsed his curling lips  
For sleep, he knew, kept most relentlessly  
Its precious charge, and silent death exposed,  
Faithless perhaps as sleep, a shadowy lure,  
With doubtful smile mocking its own strange charms (291-  
295)

The term “silent death” is interesting since it renders death at least partially synonymous with the state that the Poet seeks and, furthermore, is prophetic of his eventual fate. The use of the word “Faithless” is also arresting since, as we have seen in *Mont Blanc*, allusions to “faith” in Shelley are rarely innocuous, and never simplistic. The description of “death” as “Faithless”, therefore, can be interpreted both negatively - as an indictment of its essence and effects - and also, if taken quite literally, as a means of affirming death’s status as something beyond the human consciousness, since anything wholly devoid of “faith” is necessarily *not* human. Thus death’s “strange charms” remain unassailably “strange” since, without having experienced it, the Poet must continue to be ignorant of its precise nature.

The tenor of the Poet’s progress in the boat, however, shifts as the poem escalates until it becomes less nihilistic and more developmental, more a continuation of the Poet’s initial objective than a cessation of *any* objective:

and black flood on whirlpool driven  
With dark obliterating course, he sate:  
As if their genii were the ministers  
Appointed to conduct him to the light  
Of those beloved eyes, (328-332)

There is a suggestive nuance in Shelley's positioning of the word "light" at the end of the penultimate line of this extract, since it enables it to serve a dual purpose. If taken alone it stands as a metaphorical testimony to the Poet's original objective, "to seek strange truths in undiscovered lands" (77) and, if considered in the context of the subsequent line, it serves as a testimony to his new, hybrid quest, that being to attain those "truths" through a reunion with the "Vision" of his dream.

This searching and developmental mood draws us on into the seventeenth verse paragraph where the Poet speaks for the second time, this time to the memory of his vision:

"Vision and Love!"  
The Poet cried aloud, "I have beheld  
The path of thy departure. Sleep and death  
Shall not divide us long!" (366-369)

The Poet's earlier nihilistic impulse, or epoch of doubt, has been transmuted into a progression of his quest. The Poet is not seeking "Sleep and death" to emancipate himself from his objective; rather he has recognized them *as* his objective. In what

seems a fair division of verbal focus, the final spoken words spoken by the Poet in *Alastor* are addressed to the river upon which he is travelling:

“O stream!  
Whose source is inaccessibly profound,  
Whither do they mysterious waters tend?  
Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness,  
Thy dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulphs,  
Thy searchless fountain, and invisible course  
Have each their type in me: and the wide sky  
And measureless ocean may declare as soon  
What oozy cavern or what wandering cloud  
Contain thy waters, as the universe  
Tell where these living thoughts reside, when stretched  
Upon thy flowers my bloodless limbs shall waste  
I’ the passing wind!” (502-514)<sup>38</sup>

This speech, above all, seems to attest to the Poet’s growing synonymy with the natural world. The affirmation - through the coining of the word “imagest” - that the stream is an image of his internal landscape, and the allusion to the unarguable inevitability of his physical fusion with this external landscape, both serve to

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<sup>38</sup> It is difficult not to make reference to Wordsworth when confronted with “wandering clouds” and “living thoughts” within the space of three lines. It is possible that the similarity is deliberate, and intended to denote a nod of approval, since a version of *I wandered lonely as a cloud* was re-released in 1815, the same year that Shelley published *Alastor*. (William Wordsworth. *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Nicholas Halmi. London: W. W. Norton et Company. 2013).

abridge the distance and distinctions between the Poet's mind and body, and oceanic Nature. However, when considering the instances in which the Poet forswears silence and speaks throughout *Alastor* it is necessary to recognize that the content of his speeches are only part of the story. Of paramount importance is who, or what, he addresses them to. At no point throughout *Alastor* does the Poet converse with another human being but rather, as in the case of the Arab maiden, he pointedly abstains from doing so. Instead, his remarks are directed at a bird, the memory of an imagined image, and a river. It is as though, in order to prevent the Poet's disqualification from the state of transcendence to which he aspires, human speech must be filtered through something not entirely human. The closest we are permitted to come to a human conversation is the Poet's discourse with a creature conjured out of the deepest cravings of his imagination. It may also be that a requisite quality in the entity or aspect to which the Poet addresses himself must be its inability to reply. I am reminded, forcibly, of the third section of *Mont Blanc* where the absence of a reply engenders a kind of entering into eternity, "None can reply – all seems eternal now" (75).<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, all does become "eternal" for the Poet in *Alastor* but even though he appears to have attained the state he sought, the last verse paragraph of the poem reads like an elegy.

Art and eloquence,

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<sup>39</sup> The use of punctuation here is effective, adding as it does to the sense of expansiveness that the language reaches for. In terms of paradox, it serves as a kind of microcosmic image of the eternity to which the subsequent line testifies.

And all the shows o' world are frail and vain  
To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.  
It is a woe too "deep for tears," (710-713)

There is a delicacy in this response to the Poet's fate that might best be illuminated by the recognition that, while he began his quest in a state of agency the nature of the quest was such that he became caught up within a more monumental machinery. Indeed, the fatalistic symmetry of *Alastor* lies in the fact that the destiny the Poet sought, inevitably, came to seek him. Ultimately, the Poet can be viewed as a kind of tragic hero, drawn by idiosyncratic impulse into a mechanism that engendered his destruction. His aesthetic is one that is worthy of elegy but not, as Shelley rightly understands, of elegy alone.

In the end it seems probable that *Mont Blanc* and *Alastor* are two distinct pathways to the same destination, a pilgrimage towards a purity that lies on the other side of language. While the former may appear in some ways more refined than the latter I submit that the concept would be incomplete without the existence of both, since the only possible means of arriving at a paradox is from two opposite directions. And yet the symmetry of sense and objective is not quite so tidy, since it is hard to view either of these poems as the considered enshrining of a pre-existing philosophy, so much as the means by which confusion of thought and feeling may be given outline and resolution. In the earlier poem, *Alastor*, more than with the later *Mont Blanc*, there pervades a sense of menace that solidifies into something tantamount to a betrayal. I touched previously upon the feeling of

momentum that is fundamental to the questing tenor of the poem but there are times when this sense of urgency seems more like the response of one who senses that they are, in some fashion, also being pursued. The desire of a presiding “Silence” (65) to absorb the Poet’s voice back into itself has been with us since the beginning of the poem, and the sometimes ominous landscape and imagery of his progress suggests a complicity with nature:

A gradual change was here,  
Yet ghastly. For, as fast years flow away,  
The smooth brow gathers, and the hair grows thin  
And white, and where irradiate dewy eyes  
Had shone, gleam stony orbs:-so from his steps  
Bright flowers departed, and beautiful shade  
Of the green groves, with all their odorous winds  
And musical motions. (532-539)

The sense is one of nature turning away from the entity who has sought to achieve an absolute oneness with it and exacting a price similar to that of the ageing process upon the body. In the same way that ageing has an agenda that is foreign to the wants of the body, but fundamental to its condition, so too does the natural world seem to have its own plans for the fate of the Poet that will ultimately grant his ambition, but with the sinister cost of a Faustian bargain. Once having repossessed “the loveliest among human forms” (593), Nature and “Silence”

abandon humanity to, “Art and eloquence, / And all the shews o’ the world... / To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.” (710-712).

Thus, to some degree, it becomes difficult not to view the Poet as a more innocent, though no less curious, Acteon-like figure, with the hounds of Artemis in hot pursuit.<sup>40</sup> What remains consistent, however, is a striving for the Oceanic, and an oddly theistic recognition that the immense transcendence of the natural world does not render it devoid of cruelty. It is, however, an elemental, and not a secular, mercilessness that may devastate without diminishing. Imagination is the means, and language the mode, by which Shelley suggests it may be pursued and though the process may be painful the resounding impression is not only that there *is* nothing else worth seeking, but that the poet himself would want nothing else.

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<sup>40</sup>Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. Rolfe Humphries. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955. p. 206-231.

## Chapter 2

### **“Speak to me once again... ”: silence, death and elegy in Shelley.**

The relationship between silence and death seems, on the surface, to be a harmonious and participant one, insofar as the latter engenders the former and then coexists, unchangingly, with it. In a poetic context, silence and death can be understood as synonymous with each other; silence being the antithesis of language and therefore tantamount to its annihilation. Upon hearing of the death of Lady Macbeth, her husband offers a summary of the human experience by affirming:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing. (Act V, Scene V)<sup>41</sup>

The fact of the departed subject becoming “unheard” is fundamental to the concept of elegy, since it is only through the language of the present that the inhabitant of the past can now be given substance. Unlike the ephemeral nature of spoken “sound”, the written word might be said to signify, if only through its ability to

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<sup>41</sup>William Shakespeare. *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells, and Gary Taylor Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon Press, 1986.



sustain independently of both subject and author. It is the province of elegy to render death a uniquely vocal condition, a circumstance that seems reflexively combative insofar as it is a response to an enforced silence. In his book *Elegy* David Kennedy writes:

The elegist starts from a negative position. Positives, made into negatives by death, must somehow be made into positives again or have that transformation compensated for. His love of, perhaps more properly, his desire for the deceased, must be narrated as loss, as dispossession. Allen Ginsberg coins the word 'lacklove' for this in his elegy to his mother 'Kaddish' (Ginsberg 1987: 210). Kaddish is the ancient Jewish prayer that a mourner recites daily at public services for 11 months after the death of a parent or close relative and on subsequent anniversaries of the death. 'Lacklove' is a state whose persistence and emphasis on absence is overwhelming. We might note here how well 'lacklove' describes the condition of Daphnis in Theocritus's 'First Idyll' who seems determined to resist the power of love, 'But never word said the poor cowherd, for bitter love bore he, and bore it to the end that was to be.' The persistence of loss is also stated clearly in Shelley's 'Adonais': 'grief returns with the revolving year'.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>David Kennedy. *Elegy*. London: Routledge, 2007. p. 21.

The term ‘lacklove’ could almost be substituted for the compound ‘lacksound’ in light of the apparent preoccupation with repetition and the manifestation of language to cover a gaping silence. The repetition of the Kaddish - even the specified number of months repeats the numeral ‘1’ – and the “revolving year” (155) of *Adonais* both serve to suggest that sound as well as love are found to be intensely absent. Elegy then may be the means by which the silence of death can be compensated for and the most notable example of elegy throughout Shelley’s poetry is, of course, *Adonais*, which eulogizes the life and literary accomplishments of the poet John Keats. The ebb and flow of conflict and coexistence between silence and death is a salient concern throughout this poem, a circumstance that serves to illuminate what may be one of the fundamental objectives of the genre.

*Adonais* opens with a call for weeping, “I weep for Adonais – he is dead! / O, weep for Adonais!”, a noisy, albeit, language-less activity that Shelley reiterates the request for throughout the early stanzas of the poem. Although endowed with the obligatory emotional extravagance and flickers of hysteria that constitutes the condition of a fusion of pastoral elegy with Romantic poetic diction there is, perhaps, something more ascetically elemental in what we might term this repeated ‘call to noise’. Shelley himself, in his 1821 letter to John and Maria Gisborne, wrote that *Adonais* was a, ‘highly wrought piece of art, perhaps better in

point of composition than anything I have written.”<sup>43</sup> The use of the word “wrought” serves to fuse the notion of meticulous craftsmanship with a fever pitch of emotion, reminiscent as it is of the compound adjective “overwrought”. As a working description of the mood and mode of the poem, this serves passably well, since not all the Spenserian artistry and Miltonic ability to “take us back to the very mainstream... of the pastoral elegy”, can evacuate from the poem the underlying chord of anguish.<sup>44</sup> In a letter written to Byron, Shelley affirmed, “Young Keats, whose “Hyperion” showed so great a promise, died lately in Rome from the consequences of breaking a blood-vessel, in paroxysms of despair at the contemptuous attack on his book in the *Quarterly Review*.”<sup>4546</sup> That Shelley could have believed this to be the cause (Byron was duly sceptical) suggests a turn of mind and emotion well-suited to the purpose at hand. Shelley appears to feel a compulsion to fill the silent space of a bereavement so unjustly forced with the frankly life-affirming fervency of sound. It is an impulse that is, perhaps, intrinsic to the objective of elegy which, though ostensibly concerned with death, seems simultaneously to be an attempt to render death about something other than itself. Human solipsism is such that the demise of another individual conjures thoughts of the inevitability of our own destruction and an elegy from one poet to another,

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<sup>43</sup> Shelley to John and Maria Gisborne, 5 June 1821, in *Letters*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1964, 2:294.

<sup>44</sup> Peter M. Sacks. *The English Elegy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985. p. 145.

<sup>45</sup> Michael O’Neill, *Shelley: A literary Life*. St Martin’s Press: New York. 1990. p. 146.

<sup>46</sup> It may be worth noting the Byron’s response was justly sceptical, “ ‘I am sorry to hear what you say about Keats – is it actually true? I did not think criticism could be so killing’ (quoted in *Letters*, II, p 284)” (Michael O’Neill. *Shelley: A literary Life*. St Martin’s Press: New York. 1990. p. 146).

unavoidably, serves to doubly emphasize this already reflexive identification. This circumstance of shared identity is acknowledged by Shelley in stanza 34:

All stood aloof, and at his partial moan  
Smiled through their tears; well knew that gentle band  
Who in another's fate now wept his own; (298-300)

The suggestion reaches beyond identification purely in light of the vocational element, however, and touches upon a shared condition of isolation, and even persecution, that recalls us to how ready Shelley was to believe that Keats's death was engendered by a profound physical reaction to censure. This reflex of identification was, we should note, to be echoed by the poet W.B. Yeats with regard to Shelley, some fifty years later: "The young Yeats elaborated a not very convincing autobiographical parallel between himself and the young Shelley – since Shelley was persecuted at Eton as "Shelley the atheist" so Yeats was made miserable at school in London as "the Mad Irish-man." »<sup>47</sup>

Shelley's own description of himself three stanzas earlier serves to enforce this sense of an alienated self-perception:

Midst others of less note, came one frail Form  
A phantom among men; companionless  
As the last cloud of an expiring storm  
Whose thunder is its knell; he as I guess,  
Had gazed on Nature's naked loveliness,

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<sup>47</sup> Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.p. 57.

Acteon-like, and now he fled astray

With feeble steps o'er the world's wilderness, (271-278)

The emphasis on others of “less note”, as well as the capitalization of the word “Form” denotes an essential immodesty, and yet it is an arrogance that coexists with a sense of otherness and isolation, “A phantom among men; companionless”. It is almost as though a sense of pride is to be derived from rejection, since a failure to blend with the collective necessarily causes the outline of Shelley’s own “Form” to become more pronounced. The allusion to Acteon also recalls us to the condition of the Poet in *Alastor*, especially when seen in conjunction with the description of having “gazed on Nature’s naked loveliness”. It provokes questions about the extent to which Shelley himself identified with the protagonist of *Alastor*, who is ultimately betrayed by what he viewed as the essence and apotheosis of everything, the depth of Nature into which he quested.

Cumulatively, we may presume that Shelley viewed the requisite condition of a poet to be not only unique but also uniquely unsuited for companionship and comfort of a normal kind. A sense of remoteness and segregation, part self-inflicted and part enforced by the suspiciousness of the larger consensus, seems to have been a defining factor. It is a state of being that Shelley feels to have been mirrored in Keats’s existence. Both society and the poetic art seem to play a role in this sense of betrayal, the former by failing to comprehend the latter, and the latter by rendering its creators incomprehensible. There is a whiff of self-aggrandizing paranoia, crossed with an authentic vacuum of loneliness, that recalls

us to the opening lines of Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, a title that could, incidentally, serve as a working, prosaic alternative to *Alastor*, "So now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbour or friend, nor any company left me but my own. The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest."<sup>48</sup> The fact of the Poet in *Alastor* having chosen to seek this condition of isolation, however, is both what renders him the "Spirit of Solitude" and what assists in the realization that to perceive Shelley's sense of separateness as wholly inflicted on him may be somewhat self-mythologizing. Ultimately, the salient aspect seems to be that the condition and existences of such people may not be a happy one but the creative currency with which they are compensated is not decreased in value, even by death. This too is a point to which the genre of elegy may be said to be partially dedicated to the making of.

Continuing with the theme of the compensatory quality of elegy, I would suggest that sound is felt to be most necessary when it serves to fill up the silent space left by the eradication of another individual's language. It may seem overtly sweeping to suggest that much of the terror of death, from a poetic standpoint, lies in the question of enforced silence but such is the consistency of the human condition that this same terror is testified to in Philip Larkin's far less stylized "Aubade", some one hundred and fifty years later:

This is a special way of being afraid

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<sup>48</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Reveries Of The Solitary Walker*. Trans. Peter France. Harmondsworth, Eng: Penguin Books, 1979. p. 27.

No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade  
Created to pretend we never die,  
And specious stuff that says *No rational being*  
*Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing  
That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,<sup>49</sup>

Shelley's emphasis on weeping, and the objective of sound in an elegiac context, also seems to be acutely present in the title of the poem through the decision to extend the name 'Adonis' by a single syllable, rendering it instead as 'Adonais'.<sup>50</sup><sup>51</sup> The original Adonis was a figure in Greek Mythology beloved by both Persephone, the queen of the underworld, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love. He spent a portion of each year with each of the goddesses until he was killed by a wild boar. Thus Shelley's decision to make a derivation of 'Adonis' for his elegy on Keats seems apropos, since Adonis occupied a privileged space both in the world of life and death. The resultant "Adonais" is also considerably more reminiscent of a wail than the original from which it is derived, and the constant repetition of the subject's name throughout the poem has the effect of making it appear more suffused with a kind of vocal melancholy. It can also be understood as a hybrid of the Hebrew word for "Lord" (Adonai), and the Grecian figure of

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<sup>49</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*. New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux. 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths I*, London: Folio Society, 1996. pp. 74-75.

<sup>51</sup> Earl Wasserman offers a detailed analysis of the etymological nature of Shelley's choice of the hybrid Adonais. (Earl R. Wasserman *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971. pp. 464-465).

Adonis, beloved of Aphrodite and Persephone.<sup>52</sup> This injection of divinity into the name, especially when combined with the circumstance of Adonis having been adored by both the Goddess of love and fertility, as well as the wife God of the underworld, seems to endow the subject with a kind of universal pertinence. One might say that in all realms, mortal and divine, the name of Adonais can be found and, perhaps, heard.

From a mythological and academic standpoint Earl R. Wasserman has, offered the most exhaustive explanation for this crucial syllabic extension:

In telescoping the two words in the form of “Adonais,” Shelley, in the manner of the syncretists, was stripping the Adonis legend of its strictly Greek associations and consequently, while still able to use the details of that special legend, was raising it to the plane of archetypal symbolism. By bringing to the surface the derivation of “Adonis” from the word for divinity, he was, in effect, denying that he was employing a classical fable simply as a poetic vehicle for a lament for a particular person and was asserting that his theme was also, collectively, all those variant divinities, no matter what their special forms and names, by whom man has conceived of the godhead. But this Adonai embodied in Adonais has been variously conceived, since man has now worshipped fertility and life, and now the

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<sup>52</sup>Earl R. Wasserman. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971. pp. 464-465.



Power that resurrects the soul.<sup>53</sup>

Wasserman's allusion to the "Power that resurrects the soul" and the extent to which the name of *Adonais* may incorporate this concept recalls us again to the fate of the Poet in *Alastor*. The death of Keats seems almost to have resurrected the fate of that more elusive Poet in Shelley's consciousness and returned his thoughts to notions of post-mortal revelation. Wasserman has suggested that the nomenclature of the poem offers the subject a range of cultural and mythological residences and it can be understood that this mode of reanimation extends into the arena of elegy. Death, in the privileged province of elegy, may be only the starting point for an exploration of the nature and condition of the soul after death and thus *Adonais* can be seen as a more real and substantial means by which Shelley may continue to follow the fate of his original Poet. *Adonais* is not merely a vehicle for providing language and poetry in compensation for a loss of the same, it is the method by which the life and story it bemoans the loss of may, in some fashion, be un-ended. Again we see the almost pragmatic, but certainly not unfeeling, element in the sound/silence relationship of elegy though, as we shall see, it is not as simple as the desire to blot out the one with the other, since silence itself may be part of the sounding of poem and, perhaps more so than in any other poetic genre, find a natural space for itself in elegy.

It is in the third stanza of *Adonais* that we see one of the most clear and

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<sup>53</sup>Earl R. Wasserman *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971. p. 465.

comprehensive demonstrations of the neuroses that exists in the sound and silence relationship in elegiac poetry:

O, weep for Adonais-he is dead!  
Wake, melancholy Mother, wake and weep!  
Yet wherefore? Quench within their burning bed  
Thy fiery tears, and let thy loud heart keep  
Like his, a mute and uncomplaining sleep;  
For he is gone, where all things wise and fair  
Descend;-oh, dream not that the amorous Deep  
Will yet restore him to the vital air;  
Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair.(19-  
27)

The stanza begins with the already familiar call to weeping but is then revised into an acknowledgment of the futility of such a course of action. Instead, Urania is enjoined to let her, “loud heart keep / Like his, a mute and uncomplaining sleep”.<sup>54</sup> The choice of adjectives in this extract is significant since the decision to describe the heart as “loud” serves to emphasize the identification between life and sound on a dual level. First, anatomically, since we are reminded of the noise of a human heartbeat, and secondly, emotionally, since the heart is the organ traditionally associated with human sentiment. The description of Adonais’s sleep as “mute and

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<sup>54</sup> Urania was a Muse of Astronomy and “the ‘Heavenly Muse’ invoked by Milton in *Paradise Lost*. (Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat New York: Norton, 2002.p. 411, note 5).

uncomplaining” is also an arresting one in light of the emphasis placed on the lack of sound and complaint emanating from the subject of the poem, which serves to contrastingly underscore the highly vocal protestations issuing from the poet.

Again we have a sense of the uniquely personal nature of this loss for Shelley that is born out of a trinity of identification that extends to the Poet of *Alastor*.

However, when one considers Shelley’s extravagantly linguistic response to bereavement within the context of the final line of the stanza, “Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair” it is difficult not to acknowledge a somewhat cynical alternative to this pronouncement. It may be that, within the context of elegy, it is not only “Death” but also the authoring poet who derives nourishment from the “mute voice” of the subject, since it has after all provided them with subject matter. The decision to write an elegy, however great the depth of feeling that inspired it, can perhaps never wholly free itself from the whiff of opportunism. It may be that this circumstance is derived from an innate sense that the transmuting of tragedy into art is always a serious matter. This personal dimension makes an examination of Shelley’s motives seem not only desirable but also potentially illuminating.

The first aspect of motivation harmonizes with what we have already considered, the fact that the identification of silence with death renders sound and language comparatively attractive. Such a recognition enables us to perceive *Adonais* as an act of defiance, a vocal reaction against an imposed silence. Death, in annihilating one voice, has given another reason to speak, as well as providing it

with an incentive to conquer the injudicious silence with which it has been so unceremoniously confronted. The second interpretation, however, is more unsavoury and here we unavoidably find ourselves drawn into an uncomfortable, and possibly futile, effort to analyse the authenticity of the sentiments expressed in *Adonais*. While the sincerity, or otherwise, of the grief attested to does not dilute the potency of the poem as it exists, it does call into question the reasons behind why it exists at all, a concern that necessarily bears upon the relationship between silence and elegy. If ‘happiness writes white’ then one might be tempted to contend that despair (a fundamentally nihilistic condition) probably writes nothing, or at least nothing so structured as fifty-five exquisitely rendered Spenserian stanzas.<sup>55</sup> I would suggest that the reality contains a strong element of sentiment but it also begs the question of the extent to which it is provoked by a sense of identification that would render it fundamentally selfish. That Shelley perceived a similarity between himself and Keats, so much so that he endowed him with a perhaps inorganic sense of persecution, has already been touched upon. It may be that his compassion extended to Keats’s fate but that it also hypothesized a similar one for himself. But there may also have been a flicker of something more complex than mere survivors’ guilt; the self-pity of sorrow that is strangely exacerbated by the recognition that the survivor is required to go on living. Even if sincerity of feeling was the central motive for Shelley’s

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<sup>55</sup> Derived from a maxim attributed to Henry Millon de Montherlant, “Le bonheur écrit à l’encre blanche sur des pages blanches.”

construction of *Adonais* it is difficult not to believe, in light of the choice of pastoral elegy, that self-interest did not also play its part. I am reminded forcibly of Milton, whose shadowy presence already seems to populate the peripheries of *Adonais* through the early allusion to “Urania” (12). Indeed, by the time we arrive at the fifth stanza, his role as a participant precursor has been firmly established:

He died,  
Who was the Sire of an immortal strain,  
Blind, old, and lonely, when his country’s pride, (29-31)

Milton’s *Lycidas*, written almost two hundred years earlier in 1637, in response to the death of Edward King, was the superlative example of pastoral elegy rendered in the English language.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, as we see in *Adonais*, Shelley himself considered Milton to be the third great epic poet, after Homer and Dante: “but his clear Sprite / Yet reigns o’er earth; the third among the sons of light.” (35-36)<sup>57</sup> The impulses that inspired Milton to compose *Lycidas* are only a little easier to decipher than Shelley’s motives for the construction of *Adonais*, since it is well documented that Milton had been in search of a fitting individual upon whom he could base a pastoral elegy long before the sudden death of his ultimate subject, Edward King.<sup>58</sup> In a letter written to Diodati concerning this objective (sent by Milton two months prior to the writing of *Lycidas*) the poet observes, “You ask

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<sup>56</sup> Peter M. Sacks *The English Elegy: Studies in the genre from Spencer to Yeats*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985. pp. 90-91.

<sup>57</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat New York: Norton, 2002.p. 412, note 3.

<sup>58</sup> Peter M. Sacks *The English Elegy: Studies in the genre from Spencer to Yeats*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985. pp. 90-91.

what I am thinking of? So may the good Deity help me, of immortality!”<sup>59</sup> It is the word “immortality” that is arresting here and that is pertinent to a consideration of the motivation behind both *Lycidas* and *Adonais*.<sup>60</sup> The extent to which *Lycidas* can be described as an elegy from one poet for another is, perhaps, open to discussion but there need be no hesitation in affirming that *Adonais* is precisely such an elegy.<sup>62</sup> As previously suggested, the propensity for the consideration of another’s death to become self-referential is likely to be increased when the deceased bears some salient similarities to the survivor. Keats was a poet for whose work Shelley nurtured a profound admiration that seems to have extended to identification, and thus there is a self-affirming element to the refusal not to have the most eloquent possible “last word”.<sup>63</sup> Through *Adonais* Shelley is

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<sup>59</sup> Peter M. Sacks. *The English Elegy: Studies in the genre from Spencer to Yeats*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985. pp. 90-91.

<sup>60</sup> It is difficult to consider *Adonais* without bearing in mind Milton’s *Lycidas*, since the former is so obviously conscious of its auspicious precursor, an awareness that is repeatedly exhibited in the latter stanzas of the poem through a number of structural and thematic similarities that will be addressed later in the chapter.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Sacks in his essay “Milton: ‘*Lycidas*’” suggests that, “it was not until King’s death that Milton had a subject truly suited to that form (pastoral elegy)... This allowed the pastoral fiction of shared locale and common pursuits. The convention of mourning a fellow shepherd was now legitimate”. The insinuation is that Milton’s motives were fundamentally opportunistic. He had a style that he wished to apply to an appropriate, but essentially arbitrary, subject. He was not, as might have been more authentically organic, inspired by a subject to utilize the particular style. It was, arguably, a question of genre application, rather than genre inspiration. (Peter M. Sacks. *The English Elegy: Studies in the genre from Spencer to Yeats*: Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985. pp. 90-91).

<sup>62</sup> Edward King enjoyed a reputation as a budding poet during his time at Cambridge with Milton but died before he could establish much of a reputation and has little posthumous poetic renown outside of the context of *Lycidas*. (Peter M. Sacks. *The English Elegy: Studies in the genre from Spencer to Yeats*: Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985. pp. 90-91).

<sup>63</sup> Despite having never met Keats, Shelley admired his poetry enough to invite him to come and stay with him in Italy when he heard that Keats was suffering from acute consumption. (Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat New York: Norton, 2002.pp. 407-409).

simultaneously enjoining readers to recollect the poetry of Keats, whom he depicts as the child of the Miltonic muse Urania - “But now, thy youngest, dearest one, has perished / The nursling of thy widowhood” (46-47) - while also shaping the coming-into-being of an imperishable work of art in its own right. Ultimately, the extent of the sincerity and selflessness of Shelley’s grief does not change the fact that his impulse is for language to conquer the silence of death, nor does it alter the fitness and beauty of his fashion of having it do so.

Having considered the broader relationship between silence and death in elegiac poetry and *Adonais*, let us address more minutely the allusions to silence and sound throughout the poem and the shade cast upon them in the context of human mortality. As previously mentioned, the early stanzas contain repeated requests for weeping from Urania, who is referred to on three separate occasions as, “Most musical of mourners”(28, 37, 50), an adjective that seems, if not forced, then certainly deliberate. Although Urania is sometimes depicted as the mother of Linus - a son of Apollo and a musician in Greek mythology - she is more commonly recognized as the Muse of Astronomy and as such the decision to emphasize her musical credentials in the context of mourning suggests that Shelley perceives music as possessing a compensatory quality in the face of death.<sup>64</sup> I am reminded again of Larkin’s *Aubade*, “Religion used to try, / That vast

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<sup>64</sup> It is interesting to note that Linus was supposed to have been a “poet” and, when not depicted as Urania’s son, is sometimes referred to as the son of Oeagrus and the Muse Calliope, which makes him the brother of the famed musician of Greek mythology, Orpheus, as well as a musician in his own right. (Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths I*, London: Folio Society, 1996. p.520)

moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die". Naturally Shelley's motives are not religious in the doctrinal sense but they are, perhaps, still indicative of an impulse to reach, non-specifically, towards the numinous. Music, after all, could be understood to contain a quality reminiscent of the natural world, since its power is never wholly dependent upon language but may, nonetheless, be participant with it.<sup>65</sup>

The impulse towards transcendence is central to *Adonais*. It is an aspiration that has already been illuminated as fundamental to the relationship between silence, nature and the poetic voice in *Mont Blanc* and *Alastor* but it is not one that we have yet had occasion to explore against the backdrop of elegy, or any other poems by Shelley that directly address the question of human mortality.<sup>66</sup> The emphasis on the fusion of music and mourning has been consistently pronounced throughout the early stanzas of *Adonais* but it is nowhere more nuanced and opaque than in the twelfth stanza:

Another Splendour on his mouth alit,  
That mouth, whence it was wont to draw the breath  
Which gave it strength to pierce the guarded wit,  
And pass into the panting heart beneath

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<sup>65</sup> The unique and fertile relationship between silence and music, in a poetic context, is one that shall be considered further in the two subsequent chapters concerning Robert Browning, primarily in relation to his poem "A Toccata of Galuppi's".

<sup>66</sup> Although *Alastor* deals with a poet's quest for a state of transcendence the fictional Poet concerned is a hypothetical protagonist engaged on a spiritual odyssey. While it can be argued that he constitutes a personification of Shelley's personal spirituality he is, nonetheless, not an historic figure in the manner of Keats.



With lightning and with music: (100-104)

The unobtrusive linking of “lightning” and “music” might be enough to pass unnoticed were it not for our previous consideration of the mutually revealingly and fecund relationship between human-made sound and the natural world. It is, furthermore, significant that a subsequent description of “lightening”, we encounter in *Adonais*, portrays it as “silent” (223). Thus we have the simultaneous passing of silence and sound into “the panting heart” of the deceased Adonais by way of his “mouth”, the significant external organ of the poet. It suggests the transformation of the subject into that condition of transcendence that the “Poet” in *Alastor* was so pertinaciously seeking, although it is not until much later in *Adonais* that Shelley offers an explicit account of his view of the subject’s post-mortal condition. Indeed, before Shelley offers an insight into what he perceives Adonais to have gained through death he first addresses what he believes the world to have lost. In stanza 15 he affirms that:

Lost Echo sits amid the voiceless mountains,  
And feeds her grief with his remembered lay,  
And will no more reply to winds or fountains,  
Or amorous birds perched on the young green spray,  
Or herdsman's horn, or bell at closing day;  
Since she can mimic not his lips, more dear  
Than those for whose disdain she pined away  
Into a shadow of all sounds: (127-134)

In the first chapter we considered the fundamental treaty existent between a poet and the natural world, the latter being dependent on the former for its articulation and the former requiring the inspiration provided by it. The affirmation that Echo, the “shadow of all sounds”, can no longer replicate the “winds or fountain” without the voice of Adonais seems, therefore, a complex and potent one.

Essentially, Shelley appears to be indicating that the removal of the poet from the equation eradicates a particular kind of reflexive expression, and that the natural world is itself bereft by the vacating of this formerly populated space. Without poetic expression the condition of sound itself is fractured and the allusion to the now “voiceless mountains”, when juxtaposed with the lines of *Mont Blanc*, “Thou hast a voice, great mountain, to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe” (80-81), is troubling, both in its depiction of this shift from sound to silence and the implication of all that is lost as a result. Without Adonais, the natural world is reduced to the condition of an incomplete equation or, more accurately, a perpetually unanswered question since “Echo... will not more reply...”. Instead, we have the formerly fertile pact between poet and nature contracted to a state of stasis, where Echo “feeds her grief on his remembered lay” at the expense of every other sound.

In the twenty-second stanza, however, we are told that, “all the Echoes whom their sister’s song / Had held in holy silence, cried: ‘Arise!’” (195-196). The application of the adjective “holy” to the condition of “silence” here is faintly disorienting, since if silence is holy then it would seem to follow that the sound of

“their sister’s song” would be something other than that. It seems clear, however, that an exception exists in the case of the rendering of poetry, specifically the poetry of Adonais. We must also assume by extension that Shelley feels the same to be true of poetry *for* Adonais, otherwise it would logically follow that he viewed his own elegy is an exercise in profanity. That Shelley has something like an axe to grind need not detract from the purity of this privileged space, since it is to be ground on behalf of Adonais, and of poetry itself. The relationship between silence and poetry is therefore exhibited as unique, poetry apparently being the only sound incapable of sullyng the sanctity of silence.

The uniquely fitting quality of poetry to interject over, and give expression to, the silence of nature is again exhibited in the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth stanzas, when Urania entreats the departed Adonais with these words:

‘Leave me not wild and drear and comfortless,  
As silent lightning leaves the starless night!  
Leave me not!’ cried Urania: her distress  
Roused Death: death rose and smiled, and met her in a vain caress.

‘Stay yet awhile! speak to me once again; (222- 226)

The desire that the poet should “speak... once again” is an illuminating one, particularly when contrasted with the condition of the “starless night” after it is abandoned by the “silent lightening”. Without overextending analysis, we can reasonably assume that the emphasis on the darkened, “starless” scene constitutes

both an independent image and a complicit metaphor. Without the language of Adonais (the subject), and by extension, the language of poetry, the natural world is, if not consigned to a condition of total eclipse then, at least to some degree, obscured. It is an interpretation that seems to be bolstered by the description of the soul of Adonais in the concluding stanza as being, “like a star,” that “Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.” (494-495).

It is typical of the arc of pastoral elegy that the next “station of bereavement” on this odyssey of mourning, after a consideration of what is lost by the departure of the subject, is an affirmation of what they may have gained through their transition into death, “he is not dead, he doth not sleep - / He hath awakened from the dream of life – “ (343-344). We have seen it in Milton’s *Lycidas* when the poet affirms that:

Lycidas, your sorrow, is not dead,  
Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor;  
So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,  
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,  
And tricks his beams, and with new spangled ore  
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:  
So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high (166-172)

Indeed, in *Lycidas*, this extract is prefaced with an enjoinment to, “Weep no more” (165), a command that is reiterated when Milton proceeds to depict his subject in his newfound condition, “weep no more: / Henceforth thou art the Genius of the

shore” (182-183). Shelley adheres to the Miltonic prototype in *Adonais* both in his shift from a call to vocal mourning, to a discouragement of the same – “Nor let us weep that our delight is fled” (334) – and in his assertion that, like Lycidas, Adonais, “is not dead”. Instead, Shelley informs us that, “He hath awakened from the dream of life - ”. There is, however, a suggestion of emptiness and an inability to offer a wholly substantial explanation or understanding of Adonais’s new plane of existence that can be felt in the dash immediately after “life”. It is as though Shelley cannot help but remind us of the space left by both Adonais’s departure, and the inevitable gap in our understanding between the hypothesis and the reality of his newfound condition. It is a condition, however, that remains shrouded in mystery and can be affiliated with no pre-existing dogma. Unlike Milton, whose solace is a Christian one, Shelley conceives an eternity of genius, spirituality and the imaginatively fictive.

As though in swift compensation for the ineffable nature of the ‘hereafter’, Shelley proceeds by indicting the ‘here’:

'Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep  
 With phantoms an unprofitable strife,  
 And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife  
 Invulnerable nothings. (345-348)

This description of the insubstantial nature of the human condition, coming swift upon the heel of Shelley’s castigation of the critic who authored the *Quarterly Review* attack upon Keats, constitutes the beginning of the poet’s representation of

the human sphere as a place occupied by the poisoned language and “unprofitable strife” of such figures as the reviewer.<sup>67</sup> Suddenly, instead of railing against the imposed and impenetrable silence of death, Shelley appears to be revering it, especially as it presents a contrast to the language of the “viperous murderer” (317). Indeed, in stanza 35, the poet enjoins himself not to allow his expressions of bereavement to contrast poorly with that of Keats’s patron Leigh Hunt by permitting his “inharmonious sighs” to “vex... / The silence of that heart’s accepted sacrifice”(314-315). Again we are confronted with the implication of the elevated quality of “silence” which, when viewed before the scenery of life transitioning into death, seems to be represented as not merely the inevitable but also the intended destination of sound.

The final nail in the coffin of Shelley’s depiction of life is encapsulated in his prescription for a fitting punishment for the author of the censorious review of Keats:

Live thou, whose infamy is not thy fame!  
Live! fear no heavier chastisement from me,  
Thou noteless blot on a remembered name!  
But be thyself, and know thyself to be!  
And ever at thy season be thou free  
To spill the venom when thy fangs o'erflow: (325-330)

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<sup>67</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat New York: Norton, 2002.p. 421, note 1.

The emphasis placed upon Keats's posthumous fame seems intended to affirm, not only a condition of life-in-death for the subject of *Adonais*, but also a contrasting death-in-life for his enemy. Apparently the reviewer cannot do worse than live in the contemptible obscurity to which his words have consigned him and, if life is a fitting sphere for this most infamous of individuals then it necessarily follows that there must be a better one for Adonais. Michael Scrivener in his essay 'Adonais: Defending the Imagination' suggests that:

...the soulless Critic, living as he lives, has no life, but "lives" a death-in-life, a self-destructive prolongation of sterility, an invulnerable nothingness. In fact, only in death will the Critic be creative, because his corpse will renew nature and make possible a new beginning. The loss of mere existence, the poem now sees, is not as lamentable as the death of a creative poet, because what matters most is beauty, not mere existence. The dead Adonais has a fate more enviable than the live Critic whose life, without beauty, is not worth living.<sup>68</sup>

Although the notion that Shelley intended to depict the Critic as existing in this paradoxical condition of "death-in-life" seems undeniable, Scrivener's implication that Adonais, even in death, occupies a contrasting sphere of "beauty" is strangely limiting, at least insofar as the precise nature of this "beauty" has so far remained

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<sup>68</sup> Michael Scrivener. "Adonais: Defending the Imagination". Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman, and Neil Fraistat New York: Norton, 2002.p. 755.

unspecified. The condition that Shelley affirms is attained by Adonais is first, and perhaps most essentially, explained in stanza forty-two when the poet writes that:

He is made one with Nature: there is heard  
His voice in all her music, from the moan  
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;  
He is a presence to be felt and known  
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,  
Spreading itself where'er that Power may move  
Which has withdrawn his being to its own; (370-375)

It is a state of perfect fusion, tantamount to that which the “Poet” of *Alastor* sought, and yet there is something more potent in Shelley’s depiction of a historical poet (as opposed to a fictional poetic protagonist) inhabiting this condition. This is the most incisive demonstration Shelley has yet offered of the unique relationship between the “Power” of the natural world and the poetic voice, and the fact that his particular understanding of apotheosis is a synthesis of the one with the other. The suggestion seems to be that a poet may, ultimately, attain a perfect unity with the transcendence that his poetry has sought to articulate.

Having traversed a certain kind of language he may finally come to be at one with the “silence” and “Power” of nature; a portion of the “much of life and death” (129, *Mont Blanc*) that is intrinsic to it. It is sobering to consider that Shelley’s particular spiritualism, bound up as it is with the impulse to occupy the space and condition that poetry reaches for, must render him a little in love with death.



Indeed, it is hard not to feel that Shelley himself, the poet-atheist with his abhorrence for doctrine and reverence for the numinous, would not consider his own aspirations to be strangely met by becoming “a portion of the loveliness / Which once he had made lovely” (379-380).<sup>69</sup> We have touched already on the sense of identification Shelley appears to feel with his subject and the extent to which it coloured by, and colludes with, his sense of compassion. It may be that *Adonais* is the “highly wrought piece of art” that Shelley termed it because it is born out of the contradiction of a wish to share the fate of which it writes and a wish to remain behind in order to write it, a poem that in some fashion seeks to silence its own sound as fervently as it longs to eclipse silence.

The impulse towards a romanticizing of death in the context of an elegy for Keats is particularly harmonious. As Michael Scrivener observes, in “Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”... the speaker is half in love with easeful death because living is so painful.”<sup>70</sup> Once again we recognize the self-referential nature of Shelley’s elegy for Keats, a circumstance that increasingly seems indicative of the judiciousness of his position as its author.

Shelley’s attitude to death throughout his poetry is undoubtedly divided. On the one hand, he seems to engage in a macabre romance with nihilism and, on the other, he appears to dread the loss of what death would ineluctably eradicate. In his sonnet *Ye hasten to the grave!* he acknowledges what seems to be his

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<sup>69</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Necessity Of Atheism, And Other Essays*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1993.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Scrivener. “Adonais: Defending the Imagination”.Percy Bysshe Shelley.*Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat New York: Norton, 2002.p. 756.

ubiquitous suspicion, that death illuminates the objective of life, – “Thou vainly curious mind which wouldest guess / Whence thou didst come, and whither thou must go, / And all that never yet was known, would know” (6-8) – but also indicates a fear that every intellectual and emotional dimension that renders human existence precious and potent would be annihilated by death: “O Heart and Mind and Thought what thing do you / Hope to inherit in the grave below?” (13-14). This conflict between a desire for resolution and a need to procrastinate from it, for fear that it should be too definitive, is fiercely reminiscent of the objectives of elegy, a simultaneous need to metaphorically reverse death and then, when this proves insufficiently consoling, to depict it as less barren than it is. Whatever the relationship between this fundamental dichotomy of the human consciousness and the question of silence in poetry may be, it seems safe to assert that this is one conflict that will not be quieted.

In the concluding stanzas of *Adonais* Shelley appears to divest himself of all remaining coyness in this matter of his tentative, but conspicuous, romance with death and give way to a full embrace of it. Any regret for the cessation of Adonais’s mortal tenure is definitely shed to the extent that eulogizing death and eulogizing the eponymous subject become virtually synonymous: “What Adonais is, why fear we to become?” (449). In stanza 52 Shelley once again fervently affirms his belief that death renders the poet unified with what he sought to attain through poetry:

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,

Stains the white radiance of Eternity,  
Until Death tramples it to fragments. – Die,  
If though wouldst be with that which though dost seek!  
Follow where all is fled! – Rome’s azure sky,  
Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words, are weak  
The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak. (462-468)

“Eternity” is depicted as “white”, an aesthetic strongly reminiscent of an empty page. The “many-coloured glass” of poets’ language may populate it during their lifetime but, ultimately, their destiny is to arrive back at the condition of purity which human existence required them to “stain”. Certainly life and language are necessary but Shelley nonetheless presents “Death” as the cure to both, even to the extent that we are enjoined to “Die, / If [we] wouldst be with that which [we] dost seek!”<sup>71</sup> It is significant that the last life-bound weakness Shelley lists in the penultimate line of the stanza are “words” and that, indeed, he goes on to affirm that they transfuse “glory” with “fitting truth”. Again we recognize the necessity and purpose of language and its almost paradoxical quest to articulate the state that renders all articulation defunct.

The final line of the concluding stanza seems to perfectly encapsulate this elegant and apparent contradiction through the peculiar silence that follows the sound of the word “are” (495). Both the particular phonetics of the word, and the

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<sup>71</sup> There is a flavour of *Alastor* in this notion, though without the sense of pitiable isolation that suffuses the demise of the “Poet” in that earlier work.

fact that it is a conjugation of the verb ‘to be’, cause it to resonate over the silence that follows and the circumstance of it being preceded by the word “Eternal” further extends this impression. It seems the closest that the poet could come to a resolution that captures the essence of both his personal aspiration and the described condition of his subject. Certainly we end with silence but, in a fashion uniquely conducive to the objectives of elegy, it is a silence saturated by the memory of sound.

It remains too much, however, to say that we are dealing with an absolutely unconfused mood or a cohesive and unquestioning resolution. With Shelley, the quest never seems quite completed by the mere fact of the poem having ended. There is a sense of anxiety and an impulse to demure in the lines, “Why linger, why turns back, why shrink, my Heart? / Thy hopes are gone before; from all things here / They have departed; thou shouldst now depart!” (469-471). It is as though Shelley recognizes the need to shed the “frail Form” (271) of his mortal self and yet feels a portion of his selfhood to be irreparably bound up with it. Wasserman initially understands Shelley’s self-description in the following manner:

Shelley’s so-called self-portrait (stanzas 31-34) has almost always proved unpleasant reading because it seems sadly marred by extravagant self-pity and unmanliness. But human weakness is appropriate to the context, which proposes

that nature is cyclical but that the human soul of man is destroyed forever.<sup>72</sup>

In acknowledging the importance of context, Wasserman prepares us for his final conclusion, which is made possible by the revelatory quality of the end of *Adonais* itself:

Only... if the four stanzas are read in isolation and not as operative elements in the total poem are they open to the charge of bathetic self-pity. For to be read as poetry they must first be integrated with their thematic context and then recognized as only a dramatic preparation for a harmonious portrait, the true contours of which will be shaped by the last three stanzas of the poem. By this process the self-portrait really becomes a preparation for the identification of Shelley with Keats.<sup>73</sup>

This reading, cohesive and well-reasoned as it is, may perhaps be too ready to whole-heartedly embrace the undoubtedly intended fusion of the figures of Shelley and Keats at the end of *Adonais*. I say “undoubtedly” since it was quite clearly a portion of Shelley’s intention (through the focus on the similarities between himself and his subject) to give shape to the universal concern of what Wasserman terms, “the human spirit and its destiny in the “world divine” beyond the grave.”

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<sup>72</sup>Earl R. Wasserman *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971. p. 449.

<sup>73</sup>Earl R. Wasserman *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971. p. 502.

And yet the final stanzas of the poem retain a sense of reservation that seems to make Shelley's initial self-portrait more than just a skin to be shed on his journey to spiritual apotheosis. Rather, as suggested at the beginning of this chapter, it is a portion of the means by which Shelley is able to locate his poetic self. If the sense of otherness that Shelley seems to have been almost too ready to presume he shared with Keats was an element that enabled his poetic creativity then even the most numinous condition of belonging, once the "last clouds of cold mortality" (486) have been shed, is a kind of abdication. It is a thought that carries with it a linguistic anxiety, since the description of "words" as "weak" (468) and very much of the mortal province suggests a fear that language as we know it will not be a component of the state that Keats has attained and that Shelley progresses towards. The question, "Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?" thus becomes symbolic, through its unanswered condition, of a silence that is to come... a silence that for all its transcendence will still corrode an aspect of the identity without which Shelley cannot conceive of himself. The capitalization of "Heart" is also interesting since it suggests a need to cling to and enforce the human organ of human sentiment, which after all has been an impetus for poetry (and this poem above all). As suggested earlier, *Adonais* ends before the poet's own narrative does, before the conclusion of the quest can render answers to the remaining questions. He is,

borne darkly, fearfully, afar:

Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven

The soul of Adonais, like a star,

Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are. (492-495)

What the arrival point is we may and cannot know but what Shelley offers us instead is his own unembellished trepidation about the space that even the most hopeful human minds must fear, since it is a space for which we have no language, and to which language itself may not extend.

### Chapter 3

#### **“And we missed it, lost it forever.”: Silence in love, religion and the unrealized moment in Robert Browning.**

In progressing from the nature of silence in Shelley’s poetry to a contemplation of it in the context of Browning’s we must acknowledge that, though the shift in epoch is slight, the philosophical gap is considerably greater.<sup>74</sup> Clyde de L.Ryals (one of Browning’s biographers) suggests:

What he [Shelley] aimed at was the elevation of himself into the mythic role of the poet and redeemer of the world, and what he presented in his verse was an ideal of himself, which he considered to be representative of mankind, as, for example, when in the preface to *Alastor* he says that his poem ‘may be considered allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind’. With himself as his hero and his own inner experience as his subject matter, his poems are works of mythopoeic creation. Such songs as Shelley sang were beautiful, but, Browning came to discern, they were untrue. They presented lovely visions, which were only visions, useless for mankind; in essence they were little more than dreams of wish-fulfilment.<sup>75</sup><sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Shelley’s life spanned 1792-1822, and Browning’s from 1812-1889.

<sup>75</sup> Clyde de L. Ryals. *The Life Of Robert Browning*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993. p. 11.



Convenient as such an understanding of the distinction between these two poets is the reality is not so concise as to almost approach caricature. E.R Wasserman encapsulates the sincere, and sincerely reaching, component to Shelley's philosophical search - one that was admittedly not afraid to foray into the mystical and metaphysical - far better in his chapter 'The Intellectual Philosophy' of *Shelley, A Critical Reading*:

Shelley did [equally] well when he wrote, "Then what is Life?" a few lines before death interrupted his composition of *The Triumph of Life*. With scepticism and its attendant paradoxes as his instruments, he made his way in *Julian and Maddalo* and then *The Cenci* to a self-knowledge that revealed a probably secure basis for human optimism: man is morally pure in essence and is endowed with faculties for resisting the pressure of moral error. But although this is the conclusion Shelley would have us arrive at through the failure of our casuistic efforts to reconcile evil with good, it does not itself explain the nature or purpose of our existence.

However inherently untainted the human spirit may be and may be maintained, that does not determine whether we should seek to lift the painted veil called life –

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<sup>76</sup> Such examples of an almost narcissus-like dysfunctionality of the kind that we see in *Alastor* - " "Vision and Love!" / The Poet cried aloud, "I have beheld the path of thy departure. Sleep and death / Shall not divide us long!" (366-369) - and the idea of loving and pursuing the intangible to the other side of sleep and death, is not something Browning is so ready to advocate. There is a stronger sense of feeling grounded in human history and time, and exploring human imagination within the context of these boundaries, in Browning. Shelley, it seems, alerted Browning to the essential and salient subject matter, that being the reaches of human consciousness, but Browning provides himself with his own background for the exploration.

whether we should hasten to the grave, whether we should dedicate ourselves to Apollo or Pan. The “life” in which the human spirit acts is yet to be defined and evaluated: this is the metaphysical problem Shelley was constantly compelled to face because his faith in and aspiration to a perfect immortality seemed to make human life illusory and absurd and individual identity a fiction.<sup>77</sup>

Ryals’s description of mere “wish-fulfilment” is, by Wasserman, cast in its proper light, but it is the question of the usefulness to mankind that resonates in both extracts and that, perhaps, constitutes the essential difference in poetic objective and philosophical bent between Shelley and Browning. While both produced poetry that quested for authenticity of feeling and condition there is, to Browning’s poetry, a pragmatic element that is necessarily firmly grounded in the mortal, and sometimes prosaically everyday, sphere. Indeed, with Browning we more often find the spiritual component in the context of an intensely human scenario, while the reverse may be a truer description of the landscape we traverse with Shelley. Shelley, as we know from Ryals, Bloom and Browning’s own letters was one of Browning’s earliest, and probably most profound, literary influences but, as ever with an influence that does not wholly eclipse, one may detect an element of reacting against the point of inspiration.<sup>7879</sup> It is perhaps edging into

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<sup>77</sup> Earl R. Wasserman. *Shelley: A Critical Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971. pp. 131-132.

<sup>78</sup> “Breaking the spell of Shelley’s influence did not, however, mean breaking with Shelley.” (Clyde de L. Ryals. *The Life Of Robert Browning*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993. p. 11).

generalization to suggest that, while Shelley pursued truth and authenticity via the transcendental, Browning concerned himself with the means by which individuals might most authentically inhabit their own humanity and experience their own personal truth, but the remark is judicious enough to allow it to stand as a suggestion. What is central to this discussion is the fact that Browning's pursuit of authenticity advocated a practical and active component that is inextricably bound up with the question of language versus silence, the nature of this life as much as than the nature of power of the next. Where Shelley seemed to be always in pursuit of the essence of silence itself and its relationship to immortality, Browning seeks to show us what mortal, human essentials silence may impede.

Let us begin with a consideration of "Youth and Art", a superficially whimsical example of Browning's work that nonetheless serves as an ideal, and eminently accessible, gateway into his poetic philosophy.

It once might have been, once only:

We lodged in a street together,

You, a sparrow on the housetop lonely,

I, a lone she-bird of his feather. (1-4)

It is the reiteration of the word "once" in this opening stanza that is salient here, insofar as it sets the stage for a resolution that is simultaneously uncompromising and not wholly unreasonable. Also implied by the stanza is the

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<sup>79</sup> Harold Bloom writes, with reference to Browning and Yeats, "Because Shelley has been handled so grossly by modern criticism, we have forgotten or simply failed to see how extensive his influence was, and how diverse his disciples were." (Harold. Bloom *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.p. 17).

fact that this is a poem concerned with an unspoken and unrealized romantic impulse between two young people who are fashioned out of a similar fabric. As the poem goes on to clarify, they are possessed of comparable artistic objectives, albeit in distinct mediums:

Your trade was with sticks and clay,  
You thumbbed, thrust, patted and polished,  
Then laughed 'They will see one day  
Smith made, and Gibson demolished.'

My business was song, song, song;  
I chirped, cheeped, trilled and twittered,  
'Kate Brown's on the board's ere long,  
And Grisi's existence embittered! (4-12)

The entirety of the poem serves to illuminate all the circumstances that would render the union of these two young people probable, and yet their apparently mutual inclination remains only implied and never fully articulated, at least to each other.

Why did you not pinch a flower  
In a pellet of clay and fling it?  
Why did not I put a power  
Of thanks in a look, or sing it? (37-40)

Thus silence becomes synonymous with the irrevocably missed opportunity. I say “irrevocably” because, as we shall see, in the world of Browning’s poetry there are no second chances for such instances of considered inaction, a circumstance to which the final two stanzas stand as a testament:

Each life unfulfilled, you see;  
It hangs still patchy and scrappy:  
We have not sighed deep, laughed free,  
Starved, feasted, despaired, - been happy.

And nobody calls you a dunce,  
And people suppose me clever:  
This could but have happened once,  
And we missed it, lost it for ever. (61-68)

Again we see the deliberate use of the word “once” and, just as interestingly, an emphasis on a fitness between the two potential lovers – “nobody calls you a dunce / ... people suppose me clever” - a circumstance that arguably renders their choice of silence and inaction, over action and expression both less pardonable, and more ironic. The rationale for their otherwise inexplicable abstinence lies in stanzas eight and nine:

Could you say so, and never say  
“Suppose we join hand and fortunes,  
And I fetch her from over the way,

Her piano, and long tunes and short tunes?" (49-52)

It is difficult not to note the "never say" that immediately prefaces the hypothetical, verbal romantic invitation. Again we have the absolutism that we recognized in the reiterated "once", this time transmitted through the superlative "never", and it is a choice that serves to emphasize the non-negotiable nature of a self-inflicted silence in the world of Browning's poetry. It is further interesting to see what Browning, a poet himself, makes of romantic compromise for the sake of artistic endeavour, and his verdict appears decisive:

But you meet the Prince at the Board

I'm queen myself at *bals-pare*

I've married a rich old lord,

And you're dubbed knight and an R.A. (57-60)

Instead of the emotional fruition that they contemplated and neglected, the unrealized lovers attain a celebrated triviality, the persona as a "queen" of the social scene, in a presumably loveless marriage, and the young artist as a member of the Royal Academy, an arbiter of taste rather than a creative force in his own right. There is a subtle ruthlessness to Browning's specification of "*bals-pare*" since the emphasis on the persona's position as monarch of fancy-dress balls serves to heighten the impression that the life she inhabits is an elaborate charade and a mockery of the more authentic brand of sovereignty she hoped to wield. Not enough that it must be understood as romantically compromised but also, and perhaps resultantly, it must be exposed as gaudily absurd. The notion that a

shadowy alternative to a sincere and enriching existence is what awaits us if we miss the moment for explanations is revisited in Ian McEwan's novella *On Chesil Beach*, the eponymous place being the point of crux where unedited revelations were once, and "once only", possible:

This is how the entire course of a life can be changed – by doing nothing. On Chesil Beach he could have called out to Florence, he could have gone after her. He did not know, or would not have cared to know, that as she ran away from him, certain in her distress that she was about to lose him, she had never loved him more, or more hopelessly, and that the sound of his voice would have been a deliverance, and she would have turned back. Instead he stood in cold and righteous silence in the summer's dusk, watching her hurry along the shore, the sound of her difficult progress lost to the breaking of small waves, until she was a blurred, receding point against the immense straight road of shingle gleaming in the pallid light.”<sup>80</sup>

Written more than a hundred years later, the chronology and content of the thought are the same; the refusal to speak is a considered inaction that leads to a subsequent physical inaction, which cumulatively sucks the potency out of the existence of the perpetrator and blurs the outlines that were once the focal point of desire and objective.

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<sup>80</sup>Ian McEwan. *On Chesil Beach*. London: Vintage Books, 2007.

While the whimsical tone of “Youth and Art” goes some way to diverting a reader’s attention from the uncompromising resolution of the poetic narrative, “The Statue and the Bust” has no such atmospheric mitigations. It should be remembered that the moment of the Great-Duke Ferdinand’s visual introduction to the Riccardi’s bride results in a moment of silence, “The bridesmaids’ prattle around her ceased” (7). There is, as we shall see, a circular aesthetic reminiscent of what we encountered in Shelley’s *Alastor* and *Adonais* where silence traverses sound in order to arrive back at its original state, though not, perhaps, its original condition. This initial moment of silence also serves as a prelude, and even a portent, to the silences that are to come. Likewise, our first image of the Duke, “Empty and fine like a swordless sheath” (15) attests to the arc of impotence he will traverse throughout the poem. Although we are told that, upon first glimpsing his beloved,

a blade for a knight’s emprise

Filled the fine empty sheath of a man, -

The Duke grew straightway brave and wise. (25-27)

the bravery and wisdom attested to remain, like a sword confined to its scabbard, unused and consequently redundant. The obvious reference to Byron’s “So, we’ll Go No More A-roving” – “for the sword wears out its sheath” (5) - reverberates the more resoundingly because Byron’s brief testimony to the wearing effects of continuous romantic/phallic exploits presents the ultimate contrast to the Duke’s inability to consummate a single attachment. It also recalls us to the twentieth



stanza of Shelley's *Adonias* which ponders, "Shall that alone which knows / Be as a sword consumed before the sheath / By sightless lightening? – th'intense atom glows / A moment, then is quenched in a most cold repose" (177-180). The question here is whether or not a lesser and un-thinking element shall absorb and eradicate the most radiant aspects of the human mind. The prognosis seems to be that the contentful has only a brief window before being engulfed by the contentless. It is a thought that colours our understanding of the Duke's inaction, which is rendered the more unpardonable because his response to the Riccardi's bride is depicted as the defining moment of his life, to the extent that it reforms his entire being into a thing of substance and structure, and not an amorphous collection of appetites. The insinuation of Byron's poem, in contrast, is one of quantity over quality, insofar as no specific female is mentioned.<sup>81</sup> Similarly the bride is described as looking at the Duke, "as one who awakes: / The past was a sleep, and her life began." (29-30). There is a flourish of irony in the use of the portentous colon after "awakes" that is exacerbated by the content of the remainder of the sentence. Although, as suggested earlier, "The Statue and the Bust" has less of the lilting levity that saturates "Youth and Art" there is nonetheless a flavour of, if not comedy, than at least irony throughout this more ostensibly serious poetic counterpart. It may not be quite that he is unsympathetic,

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<sup>81</sup> Byron was an even earlier, though arguably less lastingly profound, poetic influence upon Browning than Shelley, "Although Browning had found in Byron the expression of many of the sentiments that he himself held, it was in Shelley that he discovered his own dreams and aspirations set forth with a startlingly fresh beauty." (Clyde de L. Ryals. *The Life Of Robert Browning*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993. p. 5.)

but his sympathy is to be located in the prescribing dimension of his poetry, which is his own example of active intervention supplanting a passive radiation of feeling.

Before we pursue an analysis of the catalogue of procrastination that, paradoxically, constitutes the action of this poem, let us pause briefly over the ambiguity of the verbal component of the couple's moment of romantic recognition:

In a minute can lovers exchange a word?  
If a word did pass, which I do not think,  
Only one out of a thousand heard.

That was the bridegroom. (49-52)

Up until this point their feeling of emotional identification has been indisputably silent but it is portentous that when they are first given the opportunity for speech they seem not to capitalize on it. There is a suggestion of delicate sarcasm in the necessarily rhetorical question that opens the seventeenth stanza – “In a minute can lovers exchange a word?” – since reason dictates that a minute would be sufficient for anyone, lovers or otherwise, to exchange a word of dialogue.

However, the narrator hypothesizes that they have failed to make the most of the interlude, a fact that can be seen as a microcosmic prelude to the nature of their subsequent relationship. It is significant that the condition of their romantic affinity should be wordless, since it seems indicative of a lack of substance and

authenticity that, arguably, contributes to its perpetually unrealized state. Indeed, the implication of the stanza seems to be that whatever “word” might have been exchanged was, contradictorily, of a wordless nature; a tacit recognition rather than an articulated affirmation. Even making room for the possibility that on this, the one occasion when the lovers meet face to face, they communicated in the literal sense, their ineptness is such that the only person for whose ears it was especially not intended seems to be the one to hear and, consequently, to begin to function as an impediment to their mutual objective:

Calmly, he said, her lot was cast,  
That the door she had passed was shut on her  
Till the final catafalk repassed. (55-57)<sup>82</sup>

It seems plausible to posit that Browning favours the addition of a communicational, and by extension intellectual, component to a purely aesthetic attraction. Such an interpretation harmonizes with De L. Ryals’s emphasis on what he perceives as Browning’s turning away from the ethereal visions we encounter in Shelley towards a more pragmatic representation of the numinous that might prove functionally useful to mankind. As before, however, De L. Ryals’s understanding seems to overlook the intellectually coloured brand of romantic attraction that Shelley depicted as the only truly compelling mode of love in

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<sup>82</sup> There is a flicker of something like the unrelenting and stoic Karenin of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. The emphasis is upon the irrevocable and immutable nature of societal duty, something we shall come to see that Browning holds less absolute views about. (Leo Tolstoy. *Anna Karenina*. Trans. Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2002).

*Alastor*, “Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme, / And lofty hopes of divine liberty, / Thoughts most dear to him, and poesy, / Herself a poet.” (158-161). This recognition that an intellectual dimension may be the most seductive aspect of love seems then to be shared by Shelley and Browning, but the latter is addressing a scenario firmly ensconced against the backdrop of an ethical system that denies the superiority of love over duty. While that is not a concern that Shelley directly addresses in *Alastor*, it is a conclusion he seems to advocate in *Epipsychidion*, a poem concerned with the imprisonment in a convent of the nineteen-year-old Theresa Viviani, until her arranged marriage in September, 1821:

Poor captive bird! who, from thy narrow cage,  
 Pourest such music, that it might assuage  
 The rugged hearts of those who prisoned thee,  
 Were they not deaf to all sweet melody; (5-8)<sup>83</sup>

The “sweet melody” can be understood as symbolic of all authentic feeling that disrupts the deadening calm of conventional morality and renders meaningful lives that were intended to be defined by moderation. The fact that this too was a young woman of Italian origin harmonizes well with “The Statue and the Bust”, and Browning may have intended it as a tacit nod to Shelley’s earlier poem. The salient point, however, is that while both poets seem to have understood love to

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<sup>83</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H Reiman, and Neil Fraistat New York: Norton, 2002. p. 390.

trump societal norms Shelley's focus is on the cruelty of forcibly preventing the pursuit of liberty and freedom of choice, while Browning is exploring the means and the psychology by which people become complicit in their own repression. It may be that his objective is to uncover to what extent initial inaction either leads to, or is the product of, an unrecognized attachment to imprisonment; the Stockholm syndrome of Victorian morality.

Returning to the question of the communication component of romantic love, however, the unfolding of the remainder of the poem leaves room for the hypothesis that, had the relationship been founded on real discourse and not merely the insubstantial projection of a mutual attraction, silence and inaction might have been superseded by action and expression.

The cycle of mutual procrastination begins when the Riccardi's bride internally asserts:

‘I’ll fly to the Duke who loves me well,  
Sit by his side and laugh and sorrow  
Ere I count another ave-bell.

‘Tis only the coat of a page to borrow,  
And tie my hair in a horse-boy’s trim,  
And save my soul – but not tomorrow” – (70-75)

The extreme internal eloquence and practicality of the Riccardi's bride is the dark against which the whiteness of her vocal silence and physical inertia is

highlighted. Whiteness seems a fitting noun because it evokes the condition of an unmarked page and a blank, unfilled existence but there is an intense poignancy to this un-lived and unspoken potentiality when one considers that it has not gone unthought of. The concentration on “tomorrow” as the allotted time for action and fulfilment is prescient of a recurrent theme that populates such modern dramas as Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*, or Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. Here too the characters exist in a condition of cyclical stasis, doomed to live a hopeless existence, ironically, in order to retain a vestige of hope.<sup>8485</sup> The major physical action of both these plays thus takes place out of sight, Parritt’s suicide and Tuzenbach’s fatal dual. Unlike the Shakespearean prototype, the focus is exclusively psychological. Consequently, the action of these dramas is reminiscent of the action of Browning’s poem, insofar as it is the action of inaction. What we have instead of physical momentum is the fertile rendering of the paralysis of consciousness and condition which, in a dramatic medium, manifests with a renewed emphasis on language and expression. In Browning’s poem, however, a dearth of communication is also synonymous with the absence of action, since the lovers neither speak to each other nor bridge the physical distance between them but rather, as we shall see, remain mutely observing the individual upon whom they consider their salvation to be dependent. And yet it may be that the mood of

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<sup>84</sup>Eugene O’Neill. *Complete Plays, 1913-1943*. Ed. Travis Bogard New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988.

<sup>85</sup>Anton Chekhov. *The Three Sisters*. Ed. Randall Jarrell. New York: Macmillan, 1969.

the poem conjures recollections of the aforementioned plays in part because the form of “The Statue and the Bust” is very much that of the dramatic lyric for which Browning is known. The fact that it reads like a poem intended for performance is another means by which the muteness of the bride and Duke is emphasized.

I employed the word ‘salvation’ above because we must recollect that the bride herself has affirmed that the pursuit and realization of her love for the Duke would “save her soul” (75). Once again we have an instance where the punctuation of the sentence is as revealing as the content, “ ‘And save my soul – but not to-morrow’ -”. The dashes immediately following the words “soul” and “to-morrow” serve as representative not only of the abyss between desire and delivery but also, perhaps, of the vacancy of the soul in question. It is indicative of a belief recurrently hinted at by Browning that the only means of authentically populating the human soul is to do your own humanity justice in the mortal sphere.<sup>86</sup> It is a theme that seems to lend new and irreligious meaning to the verb ‘to save’ in the context of souls. Rather than adhering to the contemporary Christian hypothesis that for a soul to be saved it must be preserved in a condition of pristine self-denial, Browning seems to be insinuating that, in order for there to be any soul *to* save, one must take responsibility for its cultivation, even should doing so be

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<sup>86</sup> This is a thought that shall be expanded upon, in an ecclesiastical context, when we consider Browning’s poem “Confessions”.

tantamount to a violation of doctrinal notions of morality.<sup>87</sup> The prevailing, contemporary wisdom may explain why Browning so obviously viewed procrastination, the impulse to indefinitely defer, as a profoundly Victorian vice.

By this stage in the poem it may seem premature to indict the Riccardi's bride's aspirations as certain to be self-thwarting, but her preparatory musings are suffused with a sense of inevitable futility.

“My father tarries to bless my state:

I must keep it one more day for him

“Is one day more so long to wait?

Moreover the Duke rides past, I know;

We shall see each other, sure as fate. (77-81)

The inverted repetition, “one more day” and “one day more”, is microcosmic of the eternal repetition of days that will divide the lovers and the silence that resonates in the aftermath of the unanswered question - “‘Is one more day so long to wait?’” - entrenches the impression that emptiness will supersede expectation. Furthermore, the spasm of irony in the rhyme of “wait” and fate” is enough to nudge even an optimistic reader towards the hypothesis that this is precisely the verb that will embody the condition of the Riccardi's bride's fate.

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<sup>87</sup> We will later consider the implications of this thought in the context of the subsequent stanza where the Riccardi's bride says, “Unless we turn, as the soul knows how, / The earthly gift to an end divine? / A lady of clay is as good, I trow.” (184-186)



Since the introduction of fate-tempting language almost invariably foreshadows some manner of fatal outcome (albeit not necessarily involving a fatality), it is unsurprising to encounter a similar hubris in the Duke's rhetoric.<sup>88</sup>

“Which night shall bring  
Thy bride to her lover's embraces, fool –  
Or I am the fool, and thou are the king! (109-111)

Again we have the use of a dash that seems to symbolize the abyss between the pronouncement and the procuring of an objective, as well the flavour of irony in the Duke's indictment of the bridegroom. More arresting however, is the Duke's stated reason for procrastination:

“Yet my passion must wait for a night, nor cool –  
For to-night the Envoy arrives from France” (112-113)<sup>89</sup>

Unlike the bride's more sympathetic concern for her father's blessing, the Duke's reason for the 'temporary' abdication of romantic fulfilment is contrastingly worldly and self-promoting. It is a sentiment that complements the competitive element existent in his contrast between himself and the bridegroom and it hints at a psyche wherein the acquisitive outstrips the emotive. Certainly the bride's

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<sup>88</sup> There is a theatrical quality to Browning's poetry that seems manifested even in those poems that are not technically dramatic monologues. In this instance we have the motif of fate-tempting (which invariably ends problematically for the tempter) that was so common in such classical plays as Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. (Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex*. Trans: Kilian McNamara. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>89</sup> The Duke Ferdinand referenced in the poem wanted France as an ally against Spanish influence in Italy. Thus we see Browning borrowing from authentic history, but for the purposes of poetry, as though to emphasise that the reaches of human imagination and emotion must be explored and expanded on within our own sphere of existence. (Robert Browning. *Robert Browning's Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Stauffer. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007. p. 194, note 3).

decision to linger is injudicious but the implication is that its impetus is born out of love. Conversely, the Duke prioritizes a political concern over a romantic one, presumably on the basis that it will be easier to refrigerate the latter. In the world of romance-themed poetry this is so terminally unromantic as to foreshadow romantic failure. It might be argued, however, that Browning is exhibiting an example of what Freudian psychoanalysis would later enable us to understand as the Ego and the Super-ego conspiring to override the Id.<sup>90</sup> Harold Bloom suggests of Browning that, “The problems of rhetoric – of our being incapable of knowing what is literal and what figurative where all, in a sense, is figurative – and of psychology – is there a self that is not trope or an effect or verbal persuasion? – begin to be seen as one dilemma.”<sup>91</sup> It is a thought that seems to capture the simultaneously personal and universal nature of rhetorical self-manipulation for the purposes of psychological gratification. For a moment we seem to see Browning, through his own rhetoric, as one of the many upon whom he is offering an exposé. It is a portent of the end of the poem and suggests that the poet does not exempt himself from the final Latin maxim.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Sigmund Freud. *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*. Ed. James Strachey and Gregory Zilboorg. New York: Norton, 1975.

<sup>91</sup>Harold Bloom and Adrienne Munich. *Robert Browning, A Collection Of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979.p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> The maxim is originally from the Satires of the Roman poet Horace and reads in Latin, “Quid rides? Mutato nomine, de te fabula narrator”. The translation is, “Why do you laugh? Change the name, and the tale is about you.” Horace is enjoining us, as all great Satirists do, against the dangers of being moved to mirth by a folly simply because it is not our own. The suggestion is, as it also is with Browning, that, what one man is capable of, many must also have the potential to perpetrate. It may be that Browning wishes to remind us that neither satire nor his poetry could exist, or would be pertinent, if it were not for the essential sameness of humankind. And yet Browning is not sanctimonious so much as he is saddened by this condition, since he has the

It is also troubling to recognize that, in refocusing his concerns on what will be personally beneficial, he overlooks the fact that the Riccardi's bride will presumably have to bear with her husband's sexual attentions for as long as he (the Duke) chooses to abstain from action. Equally unpalatable is the Duke's preparedness to use the Riccardi himself to further these political endeavours – “‘Whose heart I unlock with thyself, my tool / I need thee still’” (114-115) – despite his already articulated intention to do him a personal wrong. While the resolution to abscond with the Riccardi's wife could be said to fall within the moral boundaries of Browning's romantic philosophy - since it is an impulse born out of love and a desire to authentically inhabit the extremes of human emotional capability - the willingness to exploit the soon-to-be-wronged husband in a political context before doing so indicates a glacial casuistry. Indeed, the content of the Duke's romantic soliloquy appears shrunken and anaemic when contrasted with the richer, Shakespearean prototype and thus seems specifically chosen to exhibit the sheer unfitness of his consciousness for the execution of his amorous objective.<sup>93</sup> The substitution of pragmatic and manipulative restraint for the quixotic irrationality that usually populates a lover's soliloquy not only serves to

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wisdom to see a shadow of himself in the maxim he invokes. (Horace and Persius. *The Satires of Horace and Persius*. Trans. Niall Rudd. New York: Penguin Classics, 2005).

<sup>93</sup> An example might be Valentine's speech upon hearing of his banishment in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, “And why not death rather than living torment? / To die is to be banish'd from myself; / And Silvia is myself: banish'd from her / Is self from self: a deadly banishment! / What light is light, if Silvia be not seen? / What joy is joy, if Silvia be not by? (Act III, Scene i). (William Shakespeare. *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells, and Gary Taylor Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

foreshadow his failure but also seems to indicate the extent to which Browning considers this a judicious result.

It is the opening line of the concluding stanza of the soliloquy, however, that is most explicitly prophetic, ““For I ride – what should I do but ride?”” (118). Again we have the cavernous punctuation and the resonating silence of the unanswered question that heralds un-fulfilment but the inquiry also extracts a modicum of pathos through the flicker of helpless confusion it seems to attest to. As we have seen, this is a man distinctly and unknowingly unfit for the course of action he is contemplating and, although the question may appear merely offhand, there seems room to interpret it as containing an element of supplication; a rudimentary instinct that there might be an answer that would render the question both more and less than rhetorical. The double use of the verb “ride”, furthermore, serves to indicate that this is a substitute for authentic action that will be repeated, an indication that is confirmed three stanzas later:

But next day passed, and next day yet,  
With each still fresh cause to wait one day more  
Ere each leaped over the parapet.

And still, as love’s brief morning wore,  
With a gentle start, half smile, half sigh,  
They found love not as it seemed before. (127-132)

It is at this point that Browning begins to unveil the idea that a failure to authentically explore and experience a romantic attachment alters the fabric of the emotion perhaps even more than it dilutes its potency. Rather than the simplistic affirmation that an unrealized “love” diminishes, the poet indicates a change in its condition that is not, as we shall see, dissimilar to the lovers’ own altering countenances.

So weeks grew month, years; gleam by gleam  
The glory dropped from their youth and love,  
And both perceived they had dreamed a dream; (151-153)

The “dreamed a dream” recalls us to the dream of the veiled maiden in Shelley’s *Alastor* the shadow of whom, in preference to the corporeal Arab maiden, the Poet pursues for the remainder of his self-seeking odyssey. The echo is a troubling one insofar as it summons recollections of the fate of the Poet and the impossibility of finding romantic fruition in the context of what is, essentially, an infatuation with one’s own imagination, “He dreamed a veiled maid / Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones. / Her voice was like the voice of his own soul / Heard in the calm of thought;” (151-154). It is hard not to acknowledge a similarity in the Narcissus-like nature of the Poet’s obsession with a vision of his own mind and the Duke and the Riccardi’s bride’s wordless and reflexive ardour.<sup>94</sup> It is an ethereal and

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<sup>94</sup> Both Shelley and Browning are rendering something close to the depiction of a Narcissus-like lover but only in Shelley have we so far encountered a Sisyphean determination to achieve an impossible objective. The Poet of *Alastor* plunges into the unknown caverns of nature in pursuit of his “Vision” while Browning’s Duke is perhaps doubly contemptible in his failure to acquire the Riccardi’s bride, since he was merely required to cross a city square in a timely fashion.

impractical variety of romance that the more pragmatic Browning seems rightly sceptical of. Indeed, Browning seems to be implying that there is an actively destructive quality to an un-lived infatuation and, contrary to earlier literary motifs concerning the virtues of hopeless adoration, that an individual's most authentic humanity is to be found more in the *doing* of love than the mere feeling of it.

They thought it would work infallibly

But not in despite of heaven and earth:

The rose would blow when the storm passed by

Meantime they could profit in winter's dearth

By store of fruits that supplant the rose:

The world and its ways have a certain worth: (136-138)

The cyclical and seasonal nature of the imagery strengthens the impression that Browning's romantic philosophy caters to an allowance of time for everything except inaction. The use of the word "certain" also seems to entrench the impression of the validity and necessity of a tangible, practical element to romantic love that the alliteration of "world... ways...worth" in the same line further emphasizes. The conclusion of the subsequent stanza, "better wait: / We lose no friends and we gain no foes." (140-141), also seems to highlight the sheer poverty of the lovers' self-defeating resistance, since the resolution of this rather craven equation is stasis. However, while their situation remains static, the

seasonal imagery reminds us that the passage of time will continue indifferently until the fruitless fruits of their inaction become visible to them:

One day as the lady saw her youth  
Depart, and the silver thread that streaked  
Her hair, and, worn by the serpent's tooth,

The brow so puckered, the chin so peaked, -  
And wondered who the woman was,  
Hollow-eyed and haggard-cheeked,

Fronting her silent in the glass – (157-163)

The allusion to the “serpent’s tooth” forcefully conjures recollections of *King Lear*, “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child” (Act I, Scene iv).<sup>95</sup> The implication allows for the idea that the lady’s failure to act on the romantic possibility that fate was benevolent enough to place in her path constitutes an ingratitude so tangible that it is responsible for the corrosion of her appearance. On the other hand, and perhaps even more cruelly, it may suggest the profound indifference of the passage of time, which will wither, corrupt and kill with the ruthlessness of reflex, without regard for identity or idiosyncrasy. Again Browning exhibits his belief that a failure to fully experience the expanses of the

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<sup>95</sup>William Shakespeare. *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells, and Gary Taylor Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon Press, 1986.

human condition merits some form of punishment and, whether nature be active or passive in the exacting of this, the suggestion is that this particular failure irreparably alters the state of the individual responsible for it. Furthermore, the use of the terms, “Hollow-eyed and haggard cheeked”, in that specific order, entrenches the idea that it is the lady’s internal emptiness that has generated her worn appearance. Finally, we have the potent image of her “silent” reflection in the glass that is symbolic both of her past failure and future hopelessness. The decision to employ the adjective “silent”, rather than adverb “silently”, seems more deliberate than a mere metric constriction. Since the opening lines of the stanzas in this poem range from between eight to ten syllables the first line of this stanza could certainly have encompassed the extra syllable, but the utilization of an adjective rather than an adverb is indicative of a condition, and not an active choice. There is an elegance to the draconian formula Browning seems to be, if not prescribing, then at least attesting to the inevitability of. Silence and inaction brought the Riccardi’s bride here, so silence and the inability to act must constitute the nature of her punishment, a circumstance that the lady seems acutely conscious of:

“Make me a face on the window there,  
Waiting as ever, mute the while,  
My love to pass below in the square!

“And let me think that it may beguile



Dreary days which the dead must spend

Down in their darkness under the aisle,

“To say, ‘What matters it at the end?

I did no more while my heart was warm

Than does that image, my pale-faced friend.’

“Where is the use of the lip’s red charm,

The heaven of hair, the pride of the brow,

And the blood that blues the inside arm –

“Unless we turn, as the soul knows how,

The earthly gift to an end divine?

A lady of clay is as good, I trow.” (172-186)

The numbing alliteration in the second stanza of the extract serves as symbolic of the repetitive nothingness out of which the lovers’ relationship has so far been fashioned and the reference to the tradition of interring auspicious individuals “under the aisle” of churches ghoulishly reminds us that this is the closest the couple can come to an ecclesiastical union. However, the Riccardi’s bride’s analysis of the judiciousness of her fate may be what resonates the most. The employment of the word “use” in the penultimate stanza of the extract recalls us to the pragmatic element of Browning’s romantic philosophy that sets him apart from

the more transcendental preoccupations of his precursor Shelley. The implication is that it is an individual's responsibility to employ their physicality in the fashioning of their essential self and, indeed, that a condition of divinity may be attained through the utilization of our "earthly" attributes. Contrary to contemporary Victorian convictions regarding the innate sinfulness of the body, Browning seems to be advocating the concept that the impulses of the body work in conjunction with the soul to achieve a superlative condition and, most significantly, to be advocating it in an extra-marital context. Having failed to fulfil this formula, despite the privilege of such a compelling incentive, the Riccardi's bride becomes the "empty shrine" and "mute" testimony to her own unlived existence, "Eyeing ever, with earnest eye... / Some one who ever is passing by -" (193-195). Again we have the dash signifying the void between desire and delivery but the failure to specify which individual it is who passes, in conjunction with the double use of the word "ever", recalls us to the cyclical, seasonal imagery of the earlier stanzas. It would seem that there is a universality and consistency to this failure to authentically inhabit one's own existence that, arguably, indicts Browning's entire generation, if not humankind in totality. It is a suggestion that foreshadows the accusation Browning pronounces at the end of the poem but, before that, let us consider the implications of the similar fate of the Duke, who in the assignation of blame seemingly stands as more culpable than his female counterpart:

The Duke had sighed like the simplest wretch

In Florence, “Youth – my dream escapes!

Will its record stay?” And he bade them fetch

Some subtle moulder of brazen shapes –

“Can the soul, the will, die out of a man

Ere his body find the grave that gapes? (196-201)

The concluding two lines of the extract are prescient of the protagonist of Edith Wharton’s novel, *The Age of Innocence*, published in 1920 and set largely in the 1870’s.<sup>96</sup> There we see Newland Archer, musing beneath Ellen Olenska’s Parisian windows on the possibility of a late-flowering fruition to their so far unconsummated love, concluding that, “For such summer dreams it was too late;”<sup>97</sup> The decision that instigated these two lovers’ protracted, and ultimately immutable, separation was born out of consideration for contemporary societal morality, made the more resonant by mutual compassion for Archer’s spouse, May Welland. The cost that this apparent moral heroism exacts is encapsulated in Archer’s own analysis of the aggregate sum of his life, “Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it.”<sup>98</sup> It is precisely the kind of reticence, or capitulation, that springs from the coercion of a collective morality against which Browning seems most forcibly reactive:

I hear you reproach, “But delay was best,

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<sup>96</sup> Edith Wharton. *The Age Of Innocence*. New York: Penguin, 1996.

<sup>97</sup> Edith Wharton. *The Age Of Innocence*. New York: Penguin, 1996. p 295.

<sup>98</sup> Edith Wharton. *The Age Of Innocence*. New York: Penguin, 1996. p 286-287.

For their end was a crime.” – Oh a crime will do

As well, I reply, to serve for a test,

As a virtue golden through and through,

Sufficient to vindicate itself

And prove its worth at a moment’s view! (226-231)

Essentially, we see Browning invert the Christian formula wherein morality stands as the superlative, God-given dimension of the human consciousness and suggest, instead, that it is incidental prior to the formation of our own authentic identity. The significance of this recalibration is even more subversive than it initially appears, insofar as it encompasses the implication that human morality is a by-product of the cultivation of our own humanity, not a deistic dissemination. It may be too much to say that the space traditionally occupied by God has been reassigned in the world of Browning’s poetry but areas of His jurisdiction do seem to have been shifted.

As for the punishment that the poet deems judicious for the failure to “cultivate our [own] garden” it might best be encapsulated by a quotation from Milan Kundera’s 1967 novel *The Joke*: “one’s destiny is often complete long before one’s death.”<sup>99</sup><sup>100</sup> Despite the gap in both generation and genre, this observation, on the part of the novel’s protagonist, Ludvig, fills up the silence of

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<sup>99</sup> Voltaire. *Candide and other Stories*. Trans. Roger Pearson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. p 88.

<sup>100</sup> Milan Kundera. *The Joke*. Trans. Michael Henry Heim. New York: Harper & Row, 1982. p 317.

the Duke's unanswered question, "Can the soul, the will, die out of a man / Ere his body find the grave that gapes?" Certainly the Duke, like the Riccardi's bride, is aware of the fitness of a death-like conclusion to lives already spent in eschewing their own fulfilment, but their consciousness of the fitness of their fate remains specific to themselves. The shift in the poem's narrative voice, and the introduction of the moral question in the extract above, takes place after the speech marks have closed upon Duke Ferdinand's personal indictment, "I contrive / To listen the while, and laugh in my tomb / At idleness which aspires to strive." (211-213). There seems little reason to interpret the voice that concludes the poem as anyone other than Browning's. The use of the first person, the absence of speech marks and the lack of any prefacing personal details that would distinguish the voice from the poet's own causes him to appear not just the default option, but the self-identified one. The circumstance lends a greater potency to the poem's conclusion than we saw in "Youth and Art". There, Browning permitted the female persona to indict herself and the young man for their failure to pursue romantic, and by extension, human authenticity. In "The Statue and the Bust" Browning annexes the narrative and transmutes it into an analysis and judgment of the events and individuals transcribed:

Do your best, whether winning or losing it,

If you choose to play! – is my principle.

Let a man contend to the uttermost

For his life's set prize, be it what it will!

The counter our lovers staked was lost

As surely as if it were lawful coin:

And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost

Is – the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,

Though the end in sight was a vice, I say.

You of the virtue (we issue join)

How strive you? *De te, fabula.* (240-250)

The stanza that comprises lines 241-243 is the only one throughout the poem to contain two exclamation marks. The former after “choose to play” serves to emphasize the significance of agency in the arc of human existence. Certainly we cannot take responsibility for our own origin but the implication is that, intrinsic to the decision to sustain existence should be a commitment to populate it with endeavour. The dash after the exclamation mark again seems microcosmic of the evacuated nature of a deviation from this “principle” and the alliteration of “play... principle... prize” calls attention to the philosophy of the stanza, the order and condition of which is, essentially, encapsulated by these three words. Finally we have the self-explanatory exclamation that the nature of the prize in no way diminishes the worth of an active aspiration to it – “be it what it will!” The comparative insignificance of the popular and prevalent understanding of “virtue”

is again dismissed in the penultimate line of the poem, while the final line indicts both the reader, and the hypothetically virtuous collective, as guilty of the self-inflicted impotency that the central couple of the poem perpetuated – “How strive you? *De te fabula*”. It is interesting to note that the final line stands alone, independent of the *terza rima* rhyme scheme, a resolution both born out of the narrative of the poem and, somehow, independent from it. Indeed, it is almost as though by interjecting this allusion to a collective failure over a space upon the page that should be reserved for blankness, Browning is accusing silence itself of a kind of complicity. He seems to enjoin the reader to speak over the silence that will ultimately convert us all to its condition and to decline to enter into it before we have had our say. Unlike the participant relationship between poetry and silence mediated by the natural world that we encountered through Shelley, Browning’s feelings about this ultimately inescapable condition seem to be more combative. Where Dylan Thomas raged at the “dying of the light”, Browning seems, if not to rage, then certainly to resent the inevitable loss of language and to firmly stand against any premature capitulations to this inevitable state.<sup>101</sup> Bloom observes that, “To read Browning well we need to cope with his poetry’s heightened rhetorical self-awareness, its constant consciousness that it is rhetoric, a personal system of tropes, as well as a persuasive rhetoric, an art that must play

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<sup>101</sup> Dylan Thomas. *The Collected Poems Of Dylan Thomas*. New York: New Directions, 1953.

at transcendence.”<sup>102</sup> The idea that Browning is playing at transcendence seems to suggest an impulse to use language as a means to prolong as well and to prescribe. It need take nothing from his “rhetorical self-awareness” to allow that Browning is a poet who seems profoundly attached to this manner of self-recognition.

At this point it is worth acknowledging the uniquely congruous nature of the choice of rhyme scheme. The manner in which *terza rima* separates two like sounds from each other with an intervening, independent one serves as symbolic of the condition of the lovers of the poem, and the method of feeding the phonetics of the segregating word back into the subsequent stanza to perpetuate the cycle reminds us of the cyclical nature of humankind’s failure to plumb the depths of their own humanity. It also reminds us that the impediment the lovers suffered may have been alien to their wishes, but was nonetheless an aspect of their make-up. Their separation is ultimately self-inflicted, a fact that the harmonious anomaly of the middle line in *terza rima* seems to compliment.

So far a certain synchronicity has been apparent in the relationship between silence and inaction in the context of the two unrealized romances we have considered throughout Browning’s poetry. Furthermore, the poet’s implied and stated attitude regarding the merited consequences of such muted existences has served to unfasten both the genesis and the nature of humanity’s relationship with traditional Christian morality. However, in “Porphyria’s Lover” the character and

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<sup>102</sup>Harold Bloom and Adrienne Munich. *Robert Browning, A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979. p. 2.



significance of silence in the poem is not so much complemented by inaction as it is qualified by the wrong action. Arguably, “Porphyria’s Lover” exemplifies a distorted and amplified misinterpretation of the pursuit of fulfilment that Browning seems to be advocating in “Youth and Art” and “The Statue and the Bust”. Rather than an individual attempting to be the architect of his own internal landscape through the realization of his most self-evolving desire, we encounter a kind of cannibalistic solipsism whose attempts to create are merely destructive.

The opening lines of the poem are indicative of a speaker who projects his mood onto his own surroundings until everything becomes reflective of his particular condition:

The rain set early in to-night,  
The sullen wind was soon awake,  
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,  
And did its worst to vex the lake; (1-4)

This reflex of imbuing a foreign object with a personal sensation is prescient of the persona’s attitude to Porphyria herself. Rather than enquiring into the nature of her desires he pursues an irreversible course of action that he presumes will meet them:

I found  
A thing to do, and all her hair  
In one long yellow string I wound  
Three times her little throat around,

And strangled her. (38-41)

The smiling rosy little head  
So glad it had its utmost will,  
That all it scorned at once is fled,  
And I, its love, am gained instead!  
Porphyria's love: she guessed not how

Her darling one wish would be heard. (52-57)

Porphyria is the only figure in the poem who actually speaks, “Murmuring how she loved me” (21). As readers we are privy to the persona’s internal narrative but, in the action of the poem, he remains conspicuous for his silence, “no voice replied,” (15). There is a sinister and fractured quality to this absence of articulation that, in conjunction with his tendency to project himself onto his surroundings, seems prophetic of a result that will only do justice to his particular desires and preferences. Arguably, the catastrophic course of action taken by Porphyria’s lover could be seen as amplified symbolism for the inauthenticity of romantic infatuations founded on wordless inclination (we may feel faint reverberations of “The Statue and the Bust”). There is a kind of circular irony to the fact that the poem classifies the lover in the context of Porphyria (we never know his name) while he populates the space left by her almost uninterrupted

silence with his own interpretation of her wishes.<sup>103</sup> The impression engendered is one of pervasive misinterpretation that seems indicative of a need to both introduce language and redefine existing terminology. This harmonizes with the impetus behind Porphyria's murder, which seems to be born out of the kind of antiseptic, sub-human notions of morality that Browning was striving to eclipse and replace in "Youth and Art" and "The Statue and the Bust". Here we have a persona who wishes to orchestrate the superlative moment wherein nothing has yet been lost and everything remains possible, "So, she had come through wind and rain. / But sure I looked up at her eyes / Happy and proud; at last I knew Porphyria worshipped me;" (30-33). This is the instant when he recognizes that everything, including complete sexual familiarity, is possible between them but instead of permitting their love to take on a carnal element he wishes to encapsulate both it, and Porphyria, in a condition of pristine purity, "That moment she was mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good;" (36-37). The possessive egocentrism of the double use of the word "mine" as well as the alliteration of "Perfectly pure" engenders a dual questioning of the persona's motives. At worst his subsequent

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<sup>103</sup> The poem was first published simply as "Porphyria". Browning's decision to make the change seems indicative of a wish to emphasise the extent to which her identity is eclipsed and annexed by the lover's deed. However, this in itself serves to accentuate Porphyria's silence and thus, perversely, to heighten the feeling of her hovering presence. It also serves to classify the lover exclusively in terms of her, suggesting that his act of violence has served to fracture his own identity and doom him to be understood forever in the context of what he has annihilated. It may be that Browning wishes us to feel that certain crimes render people and poets unwilling to speak the name of the perpetrator, as though the sensation of that name on our lips, or upon the page, were a form of perpetuating something that does not deserve its own mode of expression – it is a silence that refuses to glorify evil, even if only by articulating condemnation. (Robert Browning. *Robert Browning's Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Stauffer. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.p. 101, note 1).

actions are the by-product of a near megalomaniacal self-involvement and, at best, they are born out of the kind of mutated morality that, so far from being the superlative reaches of the human condition, actually bars us from attaining it. The concept that the preservation of an individual in a condition of perfection can really be achieved without their participation (or perhaps even with it) is self-evidently absurd. Without sentience they cease to be the desired person and become only a focal point for projection. Any possible sense of beauty or achievement resulting from the persona's action is resoundingly debunked by the image of the lifeless head of Porphyria - "this time my shoulder bore / Her head, which droops upon it still" (50-51), and the contrast between that image and the previous one of her "shoulder bare" (17) upon which she rested her lover's cheek, reminds us of the eradication of her agency. The sickening suggestion of a prelude to bodily decay also exemplifies the destructive nature of what Browning seems to recognize as the fruits of a fundamental miscommunication between God and humanity: "And all night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word!" (59-60). Browning does not remove God from the moral equation, but he does intimate that our understanding of His objectives for humanity are nebulous and distorted, and the by-product of a failure to comprehend the true nature of either. In "Youth and Art" and "The Statue and the Bust" we witnessed the diminishing returns of a failure to act; in "Porphyria's Lover" we see the extent to which an action born out of a misunderstanding of the purpose of being human can result in a far more sinister and deformed immorality than what contemporary

society might categorize as a transgression. Certainly the “blue eyes” of Porphyria “laugh[ed] without a stain” (45) but it is the frozen, finished emptiness of this now silent laugh that reverberates.

The apparent expectation of a divine ratification, or at least a response to, his actions, on the part of the poem’s narrative voice, seems indicative of a need for affirmation that can only be born out of a latent sense of guilt. The implications of such an expectation are larger than it might appear; Browning seems to be suggesting that there exists in every human consciousness a small and authentic voice that, though often eclipsed by the white-noise of miscommunication, can never be wholly eradicated. There is nothing to preclude the suggestion that the persona would welcome any response, even if it constituted only a condemnation. It is the abyss of silence separating God and humanity that is the hardest thing to navigate and that seems, if nothing else, to guarantee the kind of persistent misunderstanding that Browning seeks to rectify. A similar thought is conveyed through the abject human confusion, and the disconcerting suggestion of Deistic impotency, encapsulated in a line of the Marquis de Sade’s “Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man”, “O God, you hear him and your wrath thunders not forth!”<sup>104</sup> It is not clear to what extent Browning intends to insinuate that God’s silence renders Him obscurely culpable but the poem does serve to conjure the spectre of questions, unanswered and perhaps unanswerable, about man’s

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<sup>104</sup>Sade, Marquis de. *Justine, Philosophy In The Bedroom, And Other Writings*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990.

relationship with his creator. G. K Chesterton writes about Browning's two great doctrines concerning the nature of man and God, characterizing the latter in the following terms:

The second of Browning's great doctrines requires some audacity to express. It can only be properly stated as the hope that lies in the imperfection of God. That is to say, that Browning held that sorrow and self-denial, if they were the burdens of man, were also his privileges. He held that these stubborn sorrows and obscure valours might, to use a yet more strange expression, have provoked the envy of the Almighty. If man has self-sacrifice and God has none, then man has in the Universe a secret and blasphemous superiority. And this tremendous story of a Divine jealousy Browning reads into the story of the Crucifixion. If the Creator had not been crucified He would not have been as great as thousands of wretched fanatics among His own creatures.<sup>105</sup>

The participation of this thought with "Porphyria's Lover" is a complex but not inharmonious one. Viewed in terms of the Victorian attitude to the virtue of sexual abstinence, the action of the narrator of the poem can be seen as liberating both himself and Porphyria from the evils of the sin they were on the point of committing. Sending her "without a stain" to the afterlife is certainly pre-empting the already well-established literary tradition of death being the only means by

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<sup>105</sup> G.K. Chesterton. *Robert Browning*. Filiquarian Publishing, LLC/Qontro. 2013. p. 90.

which a woman's loss of sexual virtue can be compensated for, but it is also removing both lovers from a temptation that otherwise seems inevitable. That there is an element of self-sacrifice on the part of the narrator is something Browning only seems to intend us to recognize through an awareness of its mutated and dysfunctional condition. The latter term may seem a grotesque understatement but is intended to very literally denote what we have already touched upon regarding the need for an active formulation of each individual soul. By his action, the narrator has deprived himself and Porphyria of this essential function of human existence, and the title combines a nasty shudder of irony with a reminder of how little independently formed that narrator's identity is. Bloom has described Browning as, "a great lover – but primarily of himself, or rather of his multitude of antithetical selves."<sup>106</sup> With this observation in mind, the purpose of "Porphyria's Lover" seems to be to exhibit how easily a misplaced sense of self-sacrifice or virtue can distort the self into a foreign state. What Browning is counselling against is a deluded piety that manifests as a nihilistic fanaticism, but his intention is far from sanctimonious. There is no "*De te, fabula*" (250) at the conclusion of "Porphyria's Lover", but there is a clear longing on the part of the narrator to hear the voice of God assure him of the fitness of his actions. The universality of this desire is enough to make us aware that Browning is suggesting that any individual, including himself, may inadvertently become the creator of

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<sup>106</sup>Harold Bloom, and Adrienne Munich. *Robert Browning, A Collection Of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979. p. 3.

their own anti-self through a fundamental misunderstanding of God's covenant with man. It is a misunderstanding that the poet seems to suspect is rendered the more likely by the condition of contemporary morality. We may all be forever subject to God's silence but Browning is counselling us how best not to deserve it, or to guarantee its permanence by adopting a language and condition that would make divine communication impossible for us to hear or comprehend.

The nature of morality-prescribing poetry (a term that implies a tedium Browning in no way merits) necessarily denotes an element of optimism, which brings us to G.K Chesterton's understanding of Browning's first philosophical doctrine regarding the state of man:

The first was what may be called the hope that lies in the imperfection of man. The characteristic poem of "Old Pictures in Florence" expresses very quaintly and beautifully the idea that some hope may always be based on deficiency itself; in other words, that in so far as man is a one-legged or a one-eyed creature, there is something about his appearance which indicates that he should have another leg and another eye. The poem suggests admirably that such a sense of incompleteness may easily be a great advance upon a sense of completeness, and the part may easily and obviously be greater than the whole. And from this



Browning draws, as he is fully justified in drawing, a definite hope for immortality and the larger scale of life.<sup>107</sup>

“Old Pictures in Florence” is a poem concerned both with the idea that an incomplete work of art is still a testimony to transcendence, as well as the thought that one day, when an impeding influence is gone, these great and original works of art may finally be completed. The poem can be read as an argument against any misinterpretation or distortion of the authentically beautiful, as well as an endorsement of hope through the suggestion that the raw materials and foundation for progress are sound. The statement in the third stanza that Browning, “perceives not why [he] should care / To break a silence that suits them best,” (*Mont Blanc*, 21-22) is a sufficient indication in itself of the need Browning has to react against silent consensus or inertia and, in his own poetic fashion, strike a blow against “Large codes of fraud and woe.” (81, *Mont Blanc*). As Chesterton somewhat archly observes, “Browning was, as most of his upholders and all his opponents say, an optimist. His theory, that man’s sense of his own imperfection implies a design of perfection, is a very good argument for optimism.”<sup>108</sup> Since it seems unlikely the Browning intended his poetry to be an ornamental exercise in futility, we may assume that his objective was to illuminate an essential truth, which he felt to be largely overlooked by his society.

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<sup>107</sup>G. K. Chesterton. *Robert Browning*. Filiquarian Publishing, LLC/Qontro. 2013.p. 90.

<sup>108</sup>G. K. Chesterton. *Robert Browning*. Filiquarian Publishing, LLC/Qontro. 2013.p. 91.

At this point it might be worthwhile to briefly consider the condition and attitude of an individual who seems to have subscribed to Browning's thesis on human existence, and the fashion in which such a person is able to review their life during its final curtain call. In the poem "Confessions" we encounter a dying man apparently being enjoined by a priest to repent all the experiences of his life that endowed it with colour and content:

What is he buzzing in my ear?

"Now that I come to die,

Do I view the world as a vale of tears?"

Ah, reverend sir, not I! (1-4)

The use of the verb "buzzing" seems deliberately pejorative, classifying the nature of the religious man's rhetoric as tantamount to a languageless irritant. Instead of attempting to redeem his soul by distancing himself from the experiences of his life the dying man exhibits a resurgence of vitality in the contemplation of them and, notably, declines either to regret or repudiate them. This seems indicative of a recognition that divesting oneself of one's past, essentially, amounts to eradicating a portion of one's own identity. Here we have a man whose actions may have been subversive in a traditional sense but who has, nonetheless, taken an active role in the construction of his own nature or, to put it in terms conducive to the concerns of his confessor, his own soul. Something Browning has appeared cognizant of throughout all the poems we have considered is the extreme irony of the need to repudiate so much of what constitutes the 'self' in order to render it salvageable in

a religious sense. It is an awareness that seems manifested in “Confessions” through the persona’s almost twinkling concession to traditional morality when he observes, “I know sir, it’s improper, / My poor mind’s out of tune.” (19-20). In fact the poem consists of the cogent reminiscences of a man who has actively participated in his own existence and, consequently, experienced some degree of fulfilment, “We loved, sir – used to meet: / How sad and bad and mad it was – / But then, how it was sweet!” (34-36). The use of the rather diminutive condemnation “bad”, especially when further diluted by the childlike rhyme with “sad” and “mad”, suggests that the term is merely a nod to the probable perceptions of his audience, rather than a personally held conviction. There is a lilting and unassailable authority to the cadence and momentum of the poem that seems to render the voice of the persona both unstoppable and impenetrable. This is not an individual who can be shamed into arbitrary repentance, shrouded, as he is, in the independence engendered by self-exploration and experience.

Ultimately we may conclude that none of the poems considered either preclude the existence of God or impugn His moral character. However, what does seem to be consistent is the extent to which Browning feels that self-inflicted silence and inaction widens the gap between God and humanity and constitutes a miscommunication in itself. What Browning appears to be objecting to is the dominion of dogma, and societal categorizations of morality, over the potential expansiveness of the human condition. Instead of mute subservience, Browning’s poetry advocates a dialectic of human morality that is profoundly concerned with

the pragmatic component. The more ethereal spiritual evolution of Shelley's poetry expands with Browning into a more practical humanism grounded in everyday existence, no longer confined to the odyssey of an exceptional individual consciousness while, nonetheless, remaining deeply respectful of both individuality and the exceptional. It is a means of populating, colouring and sometimes combating the silences of poetry, human existence and endeavour that is, unavoidably, less evasive than what we experience in Shelley, though by no means less beautiful, sincere or expansive. If anything, the poetry of Browning serves to challenge the assumption that spirituality and the 'other-worldly' retains a monopoly on the numinous, or that presiding notions of morality are the means of forging a pathway to it.

## **Chapter 4**

### **“With deeds as well undone”: Silence and the simultaneity of opposites in Browning’s dramatic monologues.**

The dramatic monologue contributes a salient and unique dimension to a consideration of silence in Browning’s poetry. Structurally it encompasses a trinity of participants: the speaker, the silent auditor and the reader. Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor’s “The Pragmatics of Silence, and the Figuration of the Reader in Browning’s Dramatic Monologues” approaches an analysis of this style of poetry from a direction that runs parallel to the objectives of this study: she suggests that, “rather than the usual ‘what does the speaker’s rhetoric mean,’” we should ask “‘What does the auditor’s silence mean?’”<sup>109</sup> However, despite its judicious analysis of such poems as “My Last Duchess”, her essay tends to corrode the autonomy of the silent auditors by making them synonymous with the reader, “the auditor cannot help but be seen finally by the figure for whom that auditor is obviously a stand-in – the reader.”<sup>110</sup> Although Wagner-Lawlor does allow for the silent auditor’s participatory aspect – “the speaker... corrects or modifies his remarks in evident response to some gesture or facial expression from the listener”

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<sup>109</sup> Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. “The Pragmatics of Silence, and the Figuration of the Reader in Browning’s Dramatic Monologues”. Robert Browning. *Robert Browning’s Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007. p. 576.

<sup>110</sup> Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. “The Pragmatics of Silence, and the Figuration of the Reader in Browning’s Dramatic Monologues”. Robert Browning. *Robert Browning’s Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007. p. 577.

– she seems never to recognize the capacity for authority, in conjunction with participation, that may be intrinsic to the their situation. Instead she affirms, in the case of “My Last Duchess”, that, “The silence of the auditor, a mere envoy, is not so surprising; he is quite simply in no position to dissent.”<sup>111</sup> Such an understanding fails to make room for the possibility – a possibility I suggest the poem attests to the validity of – that the absence of interruption is the result of the desire to exercise the particular brand of authority that can only exist through the preservation of silence. Dramatic monologues are often comprised of an escalating confessional momentum that interruption of any kind would either fracture or obliterate. Whether it be idle curiosity, or a recognition of the potentially useful nature of knowledge, the silent auditor, at least in “My Last Duchess”, elicits more information through taciturnity than any question - supplicatory as questions can be by nature - could possibly achieve.

The first indication that the Duke’s confessional soliloquy is not being conveyed to a trusted confidant comes when he alludes to the auditor as, “Strangers like you” (7):

“I said  
“Fra Pandolf” by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

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<sup>111</sup>Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. “The Pragmatics of Silence, and the Figuration of the Reader in Browning’s Dramatic Monologues”. Robert Browning. *Robert Browning’s Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007.p. 579.

But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I) (5-10)

The Duke's decision to display the portrait to the listener is shown not to be a singular one but is nonetheless revealing. The fact of the Duke keeping the portrait covered and restricting access to it suggests the possessiveness of an impassioned collector jealously shielding an acquisition. The appropriately encased phrase "(since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)", carries a double implication. On the one hand the sentence scans quite literally; on the other it is symbolic of the myriad unrestrained future revelations that the Duke will make to the auditor. At this point we must note the one moment in the poem when the otherwise silent listener does appear to speak, especially since the question seems to trigger the Duke's subsequent confessional soliloquy:

"And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus." (11-13)

The Duke may have inferred from his listener's expression that the latter wished to pose this question but the description of the auditor's apparent inquiry appears too literal and specific for this. It is as if the listener has deduced the possibility of an exceptional revelation, in light of the strange hybrid of the territorial and the revelatory in the Duke's conduct, and wishes to capitalize upon it. Considering the nature of the listener's role as emissary for the father of the Duke's future bride, it may be that he prefers to have more to convey to his master regarding this meeting

than the description of a portrait. It would not be unreasonable to posit that this might be the purpose of the auditor's visit, to garner intimate information about the Duke and the nature of his previous marriage that he may then convey to his employer, the prospective father-in-law – "The Count your master's known munificence / Is ample warrant that no just pretence / Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;" (49-51). This hypothesis is bolstered by the Duke's seemingly casual and rather belated allusion to the question of his potential bride's dowry. Had this been the authentic, rather than the superficial, reason for the Count's servant's visit it seems likely he (the servant) would have felt compelled either to bring it up at the beginning of their interaction, or to interrupt the Duke the moment an oratorical pause coincided with a shift in subject matter. The fact that he does neither of these things suggests that the Duke's revelations prior to this point may have rendered the issue redundant.<sup>112</sup> Having briefly interposed with what we might term the "trigger question", the auditor retains an immutable silence and appears to betray no discomposure, either by facial expression or movement, during the Duke's subsequent and escalating confession:

"She had

A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,

Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er

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<sup>112</sup> The Duke bears certain biographical similarities to the historical Alfonso II, last duke of Ferrara, whose first wife died in "mysterious circumstances". Even if Ferrara's story was the impetus for the poem, however, it is not dependent upon the historicity. As is usually the case with Browning, there is the faintest suggestion that a portion of us all might identify with a deed that, from a distance, it is easy to reflexively repudiate. (Robert Browning. *Robert Browning's Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007.p. 83, note 1)



She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, 't was all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace—all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good! but thanked  
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will  
Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this  
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let  
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,  
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose  
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without  
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;

Then all smiles stopped together. (21-46)

The architecture of the scene is not dissimilar to the arrangement of Catholic confession and, in fact, seems designed to conjure its aesthetics, from the curtain dividing the Duchess's portrait from the remainder of the room, to the auditor's question designed to elicit information regarding the nature of, and motivation behind, a particular sin. The confession itself is remarkable insofar as it affirms, without apparent regret or sense of having perpetrated an injustice, that the Duke instigated the ultimate punishment against his former Duchess, not so much as a response to a particular transgression, as a reaction against a condition. At no point does he suggest that the Duchess was literally unfaithful to him; his objections are grounded in the kind of maniacal narcissism that could only be placated by an unwavering parade of perpetual devotion. Confirming this reading is the Duke's acknowledgement that the condition to which he objected might have been rectified by spousal communication but that the articulation of his dissatisfaction, and request for improvement, "would be some stooping; and I choose / Never to stoop." The positioning of the verb 'to choose' at the end of the line, and the empty space that necessarily follows, reflects the barren nothingness engendered by the Duke's choice of silence, and everything which that decision annihilated, that being the life and beauty of the departed Duchess, a circumstance made more poignant by her probable innocence. Indeed, it is a choice that ensured a sequence of silence, insofar as the Duke's refusal to speak forever extinguished the Duchess's opportunity to respond. Thus, in this instance, silence is more than a

portent of unfulfilment; it is a presage of death.

This inability to communicate is a hallmark of the Duke's consciousness and condition; he even attests to an inability to properly articulate to himself the impetus for his ire, "She had / A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad." Skirting by the simultaneously macabre and poignant *double entendre* of the affirmation that "she had a heart", the dashes that encase the question appear symbolic of a cognitive disconnect; a habitual inability adequately and accurately to transmute an internal reaction into a verbal description. This gap between impulse and expression seems to have been something that the Duchess was uniquely able to provoke in her husband, a circumstance to which he responded not by attempting to evolve an authentic answer but by eradicating the individual who provoked the question. As the Duke himself affirms of the painting, "I call / That piece a wonder, now" (2-3). The pause indicated by the comma before the "now" entrenches the impression of separation, in this case a separation of the image of the Duchess from her consciousness. In her animate form she was a source of frustration to her husband through her ability, deliberate or otherwise, to puncture his equilibrium and sense of verbal sufficiency. She is divorced "now" from her own mentality, and manifest only as an aesthetic representation, and the Duke is able to derive pleasure from her partial presence in a way he could not when she was able to make an intellectual and emotional impression that caused him to grope for an articulation he was both unwilling to make, and untalented in the expression of.

We have previously encountered suggestions of the extent to which Browning perceives romantic love devoid of authentic communication to be intrinsically dysfunctional but here, as with “Porphyria’s Lover”, the poet depicts a magnified scenario. Like a projector of shadows on a sunlit wall, Browning employs the medium of the dramatic monologue not to alter the contours of this recurring conviction so much as to enlarge its proportions. It is a choice that seems, perversely, to harmonize with the use of traditional rhyming couplets and iambic pentameter. Certainly we are familiar with this frequently preferred architecture for the rendering of romantic, or self-explorative, soliloquies but it is this very familiarity that makes the incongruity of the content doubly resonant. As with the equally familiar alternating rhyme scheme of “Porphyria’s Lover”, we have a virtual Trojan Horse of normality serving as a vehicle for unprecedented deviance.

The employment of a well-travelled structural mode is not the only means by which Browning’s dramatic monologues recall us to their Shakespearian ancestors. Bharat Tandon, in his essay “Victorian Shakespeare”, writes: “As Romantic critics often noted, Shakespearean soliloquy is often turned inwards as well as outwards, ‘speaking out’ also serving as ways to listen to oneself (not for nothing were so many nineteenth-century readers in the thrall of *Hamlet*); Browning’s poetic redirections of drama away from the stage uncover fresh resources in the interplays between eloquence, self-communication, and blank

silence.”<sup>113</sup> In “My Last Duchess” we can readily locate the element of self-discovery, albeit unintended, that is intrinsic to the Duke’s oration but it may be that the silence is neither “blank” nor something over which the Duke has any control. The silence of the listener is what makes the Duke’s soliloquy possible and though it may be a silence dressed in the guise of a reverent subservience that fails to comprehend the significance of what is being said, it is still by the permission of that silence that speech is possible. It is a simultaneously personal and oceanic silence, insofar as it is at the will of the listener but it also serves as a mute backdrop for revelation. The pauses that occur throughout the Duke’s oration are, in contrast, something far closer to a verbal tic that tells us as much about his hidden motives as does his rhetoric. The fact of Browning having relocated this poetic medium from stage to page offers us, as a reader, an unchanging map of speech and silence not filtered through performance interpretation, which Tandon suggests serves as “a fresh setting for that play of selfhood and otherness so central to (Browning’s) inheritance from Romantic Shakespeare.”<sup>114</sup>

Returning, however, to the Duke’s professions of verbal ineptitude, it seems noteworthy that a man who struggles to explain himself to himself should suddenly be rendering an unvarnished rhetorical exhibition to a relative stranger. His words, “Even had you skill / In speech – (which I have not) - ”, seem almost maligned by this confessional torrent. This affirmation of oratorical inadequacy,

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<sup>113</sup>Bharat Tandon. “Victorian Shakespeare”. *Oxford Handbook Of Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. p. 205.

<sup>114</sup>Bharat Tandon. “Victorian Shakespeare”. *Oxford Handbook Of Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. p. 205.

coupled with the unique unfitness of the auditor as a confidant, lends credence to the hypothesis that the auditor's judicious silence is what has helped to engender an uninhibited verbal momentum. Wagner-Lawlor suggests that "the Duchess' life-in-death acts upon the Duke as a ghostly provocation" yet this alone seems not to account for the Duke's unprecedented decision to articulate the reasons behind why this is all that remains of the Duchess.<sup>115</sup> Certainly it could be argued that the evocative nature of the silent, watchful portrait in conjunction with the auditor's own silence work together to engender the Duke's oration, but there seems no reason, especially in light of the reference to the auditor's initial question, to corrode the significance of his proactive preservation of silence.

One of the chief ways in which Wagner-Lawlor does differentiate between the reader and the silent auditor is in the context of the implied space for judgment remaining at the end of the poem.<sup>116</sup> While the auditor continues trapped in the Duke's society – "Nay, we'll go / together down," – the reader is geographically and, by extension, intellectually at liberty to draw what conclusions they will regarding the moral hue and content of the Duke's confession. There is a significant hesitation on the part of the listener implied by the Duke's use of the word "Nay", as if the former had been indicating, through look or gesture, either that he (the auditor) wished to remain alone with the painting of the Duchess, or

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<sup>115</sup>Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. "The Pragmatics of Silence, and the Figuration of the Reader in Browning's Dramatic Monologues". Robert Browning. *Robert Browning's Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007.p. 587

<sup>116</sup>Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. "The Pragmatics of Silence, and the Figuration of the Reader in Browning's Dramatic Monologues". Robert Browning. *Robert Browning's Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007. p 581.

that he inferred the Duke wished to do so. Bearing this implication in mind, and placing it in the context of moral judgment, the final lines of the poem serve to effectively eradicate what little compassion it might have been possible to experience on the Duke's behalf:

“Notice Neptune, though  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!” (54-56)<sup>117</sup>

The abrupt and casual shift to the discussion of another piece of art, as well as the self-oriented qualification of the word “me”, indicates that the Duke's apparent murder of the Duchess was not so much the action of a lover deranged by irrational jealousy as the result of an egomaniacal resentment of a man constitutionally incapable of viewing either antique or entity outside of a solipsistic context. It appears highly ironic that the fault he found in the Duchess was her apparent inability to distinguish the worth of various gifts and individuals - “Sir, t'was all one!”. The Duke himself seems to categorize all things in his possession as defined by that condition; their value to him is not intrinsic; it is dependent on his own arbitrary classification. The fabric of this attitude seems to foreshadow the infamous Soames Forsyte in John Galsworthy's 1906 novel *The Man of Property*, part of *The Forsyte Saga*, a man who notoriously considered his

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<sup>117</sup> The allusion is to a sculpture from a territory of the Duke's potential father-in-law, the Count of Tyrol. It seems to be a belated and inadequate attempt to flatter the artistic prowess of the region. (Robert Browning. *Robert Browning's Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007.p. 84, note 6).

wife, Irene, to be classified primarily by her marriage to him.<sup>118</sup> Even the title of Browning's poem exemplifies this condition, the possessive adjective "My" being the first word that we encounter. The Duchess is defined purely in the context of her relationship to the Duke and no allusion to her previous life or emotional condition (except the one filtered through the Duke's perception of her behaviour) is referenced throughout the poem. Simultaneously illuminating, however, is the possible *double entendre* of the word "Last". On the one hand it could refer simply to the fact that the portrait is of the Duke's previous Duchess ("Last" then being a substitute for 'former'). Alternatively, it might be prescient of the fact that the Duke's current courtship of the auditor's master's daughter will not come to fruition, quite possibly as a result of the interaction exhibited in the poem. It could be argued, after all, that few prospective fathers-in-law would see any social, political or economic benefit in abdicating daughter and dowry to a man who has a history of murdering wives whose mannerisms happen to displease him. Robert Langbaum in *The Poetry of Experience* understands the astonishing nature of the Duke's decision to speak as he does to this particular listener in a fashion that does not conflate auditor and reader but does presume an entirely one-sided distribution of authority in favour of the speaker:

The utter outrageousness of the duke's behaviour makes condemnation the least interesting response, certainly not the response that can account for the poem's

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<sup>118</sup> John Galsworthy. *The Forsyte Saga*. London: Headline Review, 2007.



success. What interests us more than the duke's wickedness is his immense attractiveness. His conviction of matchless superiority, his intelligence and bland amorality, his poise, his taste for art, his manners – high-handed aristocratic manners that break the ordinary rules and assert the duke's superiority when he is being most solicitous of the envoy, waiving their difference of rank ("Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir"); these qualities overwhelm the envoy, causing him apparently to suspend judgment of the duke, for he raises no demur. The reader is no less overwhelmed. We suspend moral judgment because we prefer to participate in the duke's power and freedom, in his hard core of character fiercely loyal to itself. Moral judgment is in fact important as the thing to be suspended, as a measure of the price we pay for the privilege of appreciating to the full this extraordinary man.<sup>119</sup>

The notion that moral judgment becomes immaterial in light of the Duke's bewitching demeanour and aristocratic finesse is compelling, and acknowledges Browning's capacity to construct an exceptional poetic anti-hero. Indeed, Browning is accomplishing, in the comparatively economic genre of dramatic monologue, a version of what we encounter in such resonant anti-heroic novels as William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848) or Edith Wharton's *The Custom of*

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<sup>119</sup>Robert Langbaum. *The Poetry Of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue In Modern Literary Tradition*. W.W. Norton & Company: New York. p. 83.

*the Country* (1913).<sup>120121</sup> Certainly it is important to recognize the extent to which such things as sequence and perspective in the presentation of events may influence and direct empathy. The Duke is the voice that we hear and thus we are inclined to listen, but the presumption that the listener is overwhelmed, enticed and acquiescent seems to me to stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of the distribution of authority between speaker and listener, and the power that silence can exert. By participating or interrupting more than absolutely necessary for the preservation of a respectful demeanour, the listener would be missing a truly exceptional opportunity to say nothing. What I have termed “the trigger question” on the part of the listener – “How such a glance came there; so, not the first / Are you to turn and ask thus” (12-13) – and the subsequently immutable silence he preserves, seems too circumspect to be anything other than a calculated attempt to elicit information. This need not deny that the effect produced by the Duke is mesmerizing to the point that a willing suspension of moral belief may be elicited from both reader and listener, but it does alter our understanding of the motive behind the listener’s actions. Langbaum’s interpretation of the Duke’s, “Nay, we’ll go / Together down, sir.” (53-54) also appears a shade limiting and overlooks the possibility of a movement or reaction on the part of the listener that, as previously suggested, could indicate a wish to remain behind themselves, or the suspicion that the Duke might wish to do so. The notion that the listener might be there to extract

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<sup>120</sup>William Makepeace Thackeray. *Vanity Fair*. Ed. Nicholas Dames. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003.

<sup>121</sup>Edith Wharton, *The Custom Of The Country*. London: Penguin, 2000.

information through the use of his initiative, and thus affect his master the Count's ultimate decision, is also one for which Langbaum makes no room but, as likewise already suggested, the significance of the prospective marriage not being an accomplished fact is emphasized by the title of the poem ("Last" being a synonym for either "previous" or "final"). Certainly it would be unlike Browning to incorporate an unintended double entendre into the text of the poem, to say nothing of the title itself. Overall, as an understanding of the dynamic and distribution of authority between the speaker and auditor of "My Last Duchess", Langbaum's reading is acutely sensitive to the psychological effect of the a well-executed anti-hero but it underestimates the possibilities of silence.

At this point it is necessary to consider the implications of the portrait of the Duchess, beyond its role as the impetus for the Duke's monologue. It is revealing - and highly reminiscent of Porphyria with her laughing, dead eyes - that the Duke describes the Duchess's image as, "Looking as if she were alive" (2). This juxtaposition of silence with vitality is intensely suggestive, insofar as it seems to imply both a comparative lack of vitality on the part of the speakers as well as a mute but resonating sense of victory for the two female victims. Certainly Browning seems very much on the side of the two women, both of whom apparently sought to inhabit their own humanity as authentically as possible. Porphyria, after all, came "through wind and rain" (30) to be with her lover and seems only to have been thwarted in her wish to consummate their attachment by his catastrophic misinterpretation of what renders romantic fruition

authentically amorous and fulfilling. The Duchess, meanwhile, seems to have had a reflexively warm and animated disposition that remained un-dampened by her husband's comparatively unyielding one. As a result of the dysfunctional and controlling natures of their respective male counterparts neither woman is ever permitted to render her version and understanding of the events, but Browning's own tacit advocacy of the women seems to be manifest in the sheer vitality that counteracts their enforced silence. Neither inhabits a sphere where speech is now possible but the condition of their silences seems expressive of what Browning employs poetry to promote. Wagner-Lawlor suggests that "the Duchess is a presence, 'alive' because she is ultimately beyond the control of the Duke's attempted rhetorical and, therefore, hermeneutical tyranny."<sup>122</sup> Concurrently, I would suggest that her vitality-infused silence is also designed to heighten the contrast between Browning's understanding of romantic authenticity and its more prevalent antithesis. This returns us to what we considered in the preceding chapter and the question of the need for communication and intellectual sympathy, as well as mere physical attraction, that Browning advocates in a practical, human context, and that Shelley comprehends in a more ethereal sphere. The deformed selves of the speakers and inhabitants of the Browning poems we have so far considered are born out of the kind of miscommunication that can only be achieved through an extreme lack of discourse. In every scenario, simple

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<sup>122</sup>Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. "The Pragmatics of Silence, and the Figuration of the Reader in Browning's Dramatic Monologues". Robert Browning. *Robert Browning's Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007. p. 588.

conversation would have saved the protagonists of the poems from recalibrating their own characters through an obscene and annihilating action, as in “Porphyria’s Lover”, or in failing to formulate any self at all, as in “The Statue and the Bust” and “Youth and Art”. Richard Henry Stoddard says of the characters presented in Browning’s dramatic monologues:

Shakespeare’s characters are all actualities, and the passions they exhibit and develop are such as we find in men and women we know. We understand them when they speak, and when they act. Mr Browning’s characters are possibilities, perhaps, but we have never met with them. We cannot follow them in their talk, and their actions puzzle us. They are too subtle, too metaphysical, too remote, from mankind. It is wise for a poet to work ‘from within outward,’ but he should not work from so far within as never to come to the surface.<sup>123</sup>

It may be that Stoddard’s claim never to have “met with” such individuals as Browning depicts is more than the deliberate obliviousness to dysfunctionality that is the hallmark of Victorian social nicety. Rather it is because, as suggested, Browning is depicting an aberration, the miscommunication and resultant action required for a person to formulate a kind of anti-self (though not an “anti-self” of the philosophical sort that we shall come to experience with Yeats), or to stunt the development of selfhood through inaction. The former is extreme enough that it

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<sup>123</sup>Harold Bloom. *Robert Browning*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009. pp.143-144.

would not be likely to self-advertise in reality and the latter is so faded and vacated that it would probably fail to create an impression outside of poetry. For it is in poetry that such individuals may be given shape and substance, and where Browning may exhibit them as a cautionary tale for a wrongly lived existence, as well as a psychological study in themselves. “Subtle” and “metaphysical” they necessarily are, since what we are being shown is the process of their formation, but they are remote only insofar as we all suspect the path of self-negation to lie some distance away from the one we are pursuing.

I began this chapter by suggesting that Wagner-Lawlor’s essay was, perhaps, divergent (not to say deficient) through its tendency to equate the reader with the figure of the silent auditor. Although she does belatedly affirm that, “Auditor and reader must, therefore, part ways” she does so, as previously suggested, in a fashion that impugns and diminishes the auditor’s agency and authority: “For the auditor, silence signals a failure of language”.<sup>124</sup> Wagner-Lawlor never fully embraces the recognition that the figure of the silent auditor, at least in “My Last Duchess”, is an entirely autonomous entity, wholly distinct from the reader – “Only the real reader, distinct from the “you” in the poem, has the freedom, gained at the expense of the speaker himself, to realize the speaker’s

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<sup>124</sup>Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. “The Pragmatics of Silence, and the Figuration of the Reader in Browning’s Dramatic Monologues”. Robert Browning. *Robert Browning’s Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007.p. 583.

self-portrait fully – that is, to interpret.”<sup>125</sup> This vacillation between equation and distinction is quite as contradictory as the conclusions that Wagner-Lawlor draws from it are laboured. Wagner-Lawlor’s summation is what she calls the “silence ‘made man’”. This is a kind of hypothetical outline of an individual that is conceptually created by the reader’s impulse to move away from the passive auditor and manifest their own active interpretation, thus conjuring something tantamount to an individual literally born out of the silence:

I began this chapter by quoting Alberto Schon: “There scarcely exists a silence ‘made man’.” What I am suggesting is that in the Browning dramatic monologue the figure of the silent auditor does emerge, in and through the shift from the passive to the active mode of silence, within the reader. The discernment of the second-person auditor is only possible through the reader’s own more distant, objective, and possibly resistant response to the speaker. With the full force of irony, the self-image that the speaker would delineate is only achieved when the reader distinguishes her/himself from the shadowy passivity of the listener’s silence, and pulls away from the sympathetic association with the manipulated figure. And in turn, the reader, while performing the action of constituting the speaker, will also delineate – in her own image – the form of the silent listener. In this kind of poem, silence is “made man,” created in the image of the second-

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<sup>125</sup> Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. “The Pragmatics of Silence, and the Figuration of the Reader in Browning’s Dramatic Monologues”. Robert Browning. *Robert Browning’s Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007. p. 584.

person “I” that refuses to be effaced, that is the “you,” the reader.<sup>126</sup>

As a resolution and conclusion, this seems resoundingly unresolved and inconclusive insofar as it depends upon the insufficiently substantiated notion that the silence of the auditor is submissive and enforced, not authoritative and chosen. Wagner-Lawlor’s concept rests upon a reader’s hypothetical wish to dissociate him/herself from the comparatively cringing and passive auditor, an impulse that cannot exist if we acknowledge that the force and independence of the listener’s tacit participation makes him and the reader already obviously distinct. The entire notion of a separate entity being virtually conjured out of a vacillating and mutating duality between reader and listener seems nebulous, while the recognition that no dualism exists obviates the necessity for either cognitive dissonance or analytical gymnastics. Reader and listener are not the same and were never intended to be by Browning because the listener is as physical, if not as vocal, a presence in the poem as is the Duke. Such mistaken conclusions can only arise from a failure to recognize the power and impact of the well-sustained silence that makes this, and so many other dramatic monologues, possible. It is a circumstance that also reveals something about the nature of Browning’s aforementioned shift from the “page” to the “stage”.<sup>127</sup> A stage soliloquy in the

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<sup>126</sup>Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. “The Pragmatics of Silence, and the Figuration of the Reader in Browning’s Dramatic Monologues”. Robert Browning. *Robert Browning’s Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007.p. 589.

<sup>127</sup>Bharat Tandon. “Victorian Shakespeare”. *Oxford Handbook Of Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. p. 204.



Shakespearean tradition cannot be a soliloquy if there is present upon the stage another individual to whom it is audible. Only the audience can be the silent listener; a shadowy stand-in for the speaker's own consciousness, and sometimes conscience. If another individual is on stage it becomes either monologue or duologue. Browning's dramatic monologues offer us a privileged space between soliloquy and monologue. Another individual may be present and able to hear without either silencing the speaker or transmuting the scenario into something less self-revealing, since the weapon they wield is the paradoxical power of silence and unobtrusiveness. But to us, the readers, they should be as clear upon the metaphorical stage of the poem as the speaker is himself.

Wagner-Lawlor has, however, recalled us again to the question of judgment that seems, tacitly, to be front-lined by the genre of dramatic monologue. While the space for judgment is merely implied through the architecture of "My Last Duchess", its confessional content and aesthetics, "Porphyria's Lover" seems to demand, through the concluding statement, a virtual request for it - "And yet God has not said a word!" (60). In "My Last Duchess" we are able to make room both for a probable judgment in the world of the poem that may well prove an impediment to the Duke's new marital objectives, and the separate judgment that is the province of the reader, and which populates the silent space after the poem's cessation. Earlier in the chapter we considered the likelihood that Browning was entrenching a probably already unfavourable response to the Duke through the callous and uniform possessiveness of the concluding lines, while in "Porphyria's

Lover” we previously addressed the implied abyss between God and humanity, and the catastrophic scope for romantic and religious misinterpretation. And yet the space at the end of “Porphyria’s Lover”, directly following the allusion to God’s silence, seems more notably designed to recall us to the necessity of the employment of our own judgment and the profound danger of looking beyond the human moral reflex for answers and analysis. The implication seems to be that, if God remains silent, it is our responsibility to speak and repudiate such a distortion of his perceived message, and our own autonomous morality. There is nothing to substantiate the idea that Browning intends to impugn God himself as a concept or, for want of a larger term, an individual. What he does seem to aim at exposing are various sinister, and eminently human, misinterpretations of the nature and objectives of the divine (we are back with Shelley’s “Large codes of fraud and woe”). “Porphyria’s Lover” is one of the two “Madhouse Cells” poems in Browning’s 1842 *Dramatic Lyrics*, the second being “Johannes Agricola in Meditation”. This is a poem concerned with the individual who founded Antinomianism, a Christian sect that bore some similarities to Calvinism through the emphasis it placed on the concept of predestination.<sup>128</sup> The narrator of the poem is of the belief that questions of morality are, essentially, immaterial to him since he need have no fear of divine reprisals, being already among the elect.

There’s heaven above, and night by night

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<sup>128</sup>Robert Browning. *Robert Browning’s Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007.p. 100, note 1.

I look right through its gorgeous roof;  
No suns and moons though e're so bright  
Avail to stop me; splendour-proof  
I keep the broods of stars aloof. (1-5)

These opening lines contain an allusion to Shelley's *The Cloud*:

I bind the Sun's throne with a burning zone  
And the Moon's with a girdle of pearl;  
The volcanoes are dim, and the stars reel and swim  
When the whirlwinds my banner unfurl.  
From cape to cape, with a bridge-like shape,  
Over a torrent sea,  
Sunbeam-proof, I hang like a roof-  
The mountains its columns be! (59-66)

The speaker in Browning's poem appears to feel a latent sense of conflict with the natural world, as though he knew it would "Avail" to stop him if it could, and perhaps senses the justice of the impulse. However he advocates the notion that everything, including natural law, is subjugated to his condition as a member of God's elect. Nature for him is little more than an intervening vista, a screen that temporarily obscures his "own abode" (8). Thus there is a strong sense of separation in this speaker's mind between the natural world and the numinous, and an absolute disdain for the consequences of actions, or the formulation of ideas, that makes him appear something approaching the antithesis of the Poet in *Alastor*.

He need not “seek strange truths in undiscovered lands” (77) because, for him, there is only one truth, and one fanatically solipsistic way of understanding it.

I have God’s warrant, could I bend

All hideous sins, as in a cup,

To drink the mingled venoms up;

Secure my nature will convert

The draught to blossoming gladness fast: (33-37)

The diction of the poem has a gloating viciousness and a tendency to revel in the corrupt that is not unlike the vengeful weather elements described at the beginning of “Porphyria’s Lover”. Most pertinent of all, however, is the speaker’s apparent recognition of the extent to which he should be an aberration were he not endowed with an inalienable divine oneness.

God, whom I praise; how could I praise,

If such as I might understand,

Make out and reckon on his ways,

And bargain for his love, and stand,

Paying a price, at his right hand? (56-60)

The resonating silence of the unanswered question seems to exhibit the same degree of latent self-suspicion that we saw in the speaker’s apparently perturbed resentment at God’s silence at the end of “Porphyria’s Lover”. What Browning seems to wish to emphasize is that, no matter how strident the voice of a distorted morality may be, there remains, even in madness, an unquiet awareness of the

mental self-mutilation required to arrive at such a condition.

The aforementioned allusion to Shelley's "The Cloud" is more than a nod from Browning to a revered precursor; it is a deliberate attempt to contrast an inharmonious mind with something utterly in harmony with its own surroundings. The cloud is part of the functioning universe, while the speaker in Browning's poem is both fundamentally dysfunctional and, in his own view at least, outside the perceived natural order of things. Not only is he incapable of recognizing the ebb and flow of the moral universe but his suggestion that he can "look right through" the "gorgeous roof" is indicative of a particular kind of blindness. It may not be going too far to suggest that, in the context of Shelleyan allusion, anyone who can see through nature must be missing something essential. Furthermore, if we consider the cloud, and its constantly metamorphosing but substantive state, as a metaphor for the formulation of ideas then the stagnant and static philosophy in the Browning poem is exposed for what it is. It is this kind of misuse of life and religion that Browning is exhibiting the destructive and obstructive effects of, since it creates a barrier between both the world and one's own soul. "Madhouse Cells", then, seems to be the place where the mind becomes imprisoned due to a deformity too great to recognize itself. Authentic and organic identity becomes cannibalized by its antithesis. It is a condition that can be most acutely revealed by the dramatic monologue, where the gaps in self-knowledge are exhibited by self-explanation, and where silence only serves to further emphasize what it was designed to obscure.

We have considered Browning's tendency to endow the silent figures of the deceased with a paradoxical but intense vitality, and this tendency might draw us into an exploration of his poem "A Toccata of Galuppi's" and the role that silence has to play within it. "A Toccata of Galuppi's" is not quite a dramatic monologue so much as an internal monologue: a reverie upon, and revitalization of, a bygone Venetian era reborn out of the evocative and fertile act of listening to music:

## II

Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.  
What, they lived once thus at Venice, where the merchants were the kings  
Where St. Marks is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?

## III.

Ay, because the sea's the street there; and 'tis arched by... what you call  
... Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:  
I was never out of England - it's as if I saw it all! (4-9)

The speaker (and I think we are safe in presuming it is a devised speaker, since Browning first visited Venice in 1838, and "A Toccata of Galuppi's" was first published in 1855) attests to the absence of any first-hand experience of Venice and yet articulates a rich and fluent description of the mood and motion of the city

he does not know.<sup>129</sup> Browning may be hinting at something tantamount to Wordsworth's affirmation of the transcendence of imagination in *The Prelude* when he "Beheld the summit of Mount Blanc, and griev'd / To have a soulless image on the eye / Which had usurped upon a living thought / That never more could be:" (Book 6, 525-528)<sup>130</sup>. However, it is of importance that, in "A Toccata of Galuppi's", the trigger for this transcendence seems to be music itself with its wordless and perversely naturalistic beauty. The paradoxical and provocative coexistence of silence and sound in the context of music is something we previously saw in Shelley's *Alastor* when the Poet encounters the veiled maiden, who simultaneously entrenches and redirects the impetus, as well as becoming the emblem, for his odyssey:

her fair hands  
Were bare alone, sweeping some strange harp  
Strange symphony, and in their branching veins  
The eloquent blood told an ineffable tale.  
The beating of her heart was heard to fill  
The pauses of her music, (165-170)

In the first chapter we considered the extent to which poetry occupied a privileged space for Shelley, insofar as it was the single mode of sound that could hope to capture and emulate the numinous silence of the natural world. In the above

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<sup>129</sup>Clyde de L. Ryals. *The Life Of Robert Browning*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993. p. 43.

<sup>130</sup>Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970.

extract from *Alastor* we recognize a microcosmic manifestation of the provocation for “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”, which seems to suggest that music also populates this selective arena. Like poetry, music is able to execute and encompass what we might term the ‘simultaneity of opposites’ through a virtual coexistence of silence and sound, and it seems implied that this apparently contradictory state is what engenders creativity. George Steiner writes: “Where poetry seeks to dissociate itself from the exactions of clear meaning and from the common usages of syntax, it will tend toward an ideal of musical form. This tendency plays a fascinating role in modern literature. The thought of giving to words and prosody values equivalent to music is an ancient one.”<sup>131</sup> The almost elemental fusion of the mystical aura of the past with the experimentalism of the modern is acutely present in Browning’s poem. Through the act of hearing music the speaker is able to inhabit two spheres of existence simultaneously and the poem itself becomes a harmony of dissonance. It is an apparent contradiction for which Browning offers an adept music-based metaphor, “Those suspensions, those solutions”, which is the sustaining of one chord into another, producing a temporary discordance and momentarily surprisingly the ear until it is able to rectify the apparent dissonance.<sup>132</sup> The relationship between silence and music then becomes like that of past and present; a participation of apparently distinct conditions that are, inexorably, interactive.

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<sup>131</sup>George Steiner. *Language And Silence*. New York: Atheneum, 1977. p. 28.

<sup>132</sup> Robert Browning. *Robert Browning’s Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007. p. 159, note 7.



On the question of the accuracy of Browning's musical allusions Stefan Hawlin has been circumspect and eloquent:

'Sixths diminished', as a whole line of critics have zealously pointed out, is musically anomalous, for they would not be discrete intervals, but really just 'perfect fifths'. It has been suggested, rightly I think, that Browning had in mind 'minor' sixths, actually dissonant intervals with a painful and sometimes anguished effect. Really, though, he was not bothered with musical accuracy. 'Diminished', while musically ambiguous, extends the suggestion of 'lesser' – of things not being full or ripe, of things falling back upon themselves – and just hints, in the larger context, at the diminishments that come with age.<sup>133</sup>

Strictly speaking, the question of accurate musical representation seems to have been a secondary concern to Browning's interest in the evocative effect of the medium itself and its capacity to summon such apparently foreign words and images. The technicalities of music are subjugated to a symbolism of mood. The notion of harmony being formed out of an apparent discord, a sense of fusion and understanding, coupled with a profound feeling of otherness, are more important to Browning than a strictly precise representation of musical theory. The fact that Browning should take an almost Shakespearian license with musical terminology,

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<sup>133</sup>Robert Browning. *Robert Browning's Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007.p. 629.

however, seems both natural to the genre of dramatic monologue and also to effect a more legitimate impression of a mind caught off-guard by its own reverie.

The Shelleyan trajectory for the creativity of contradiction works, as we have seen, to constitute a fusion with the natural world; the inhabiting of an elemental condition where all contradictions are made harmonious, all sound suffused with silence, and all knowledge, essentially, tantamount to a state of no-knowledge. Browning, in contrast, seems almost to be in conflict with any idea of an amalgamation of man and nature and instead explores the question of such evocative contradictions without abandoning either his own sense of humanness or the human sphere. There is an emphasis on the technical and the specific mode of execution, as well as the meditation that human disciplines and creativity ignite, in Browning's poem. Music makes possible a time and space travel of imagination, but an imagination of human existence as it was and is, rather than a voyage into a hypothetical landscape that blurs the outline between the human and the divine.

## XI

But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve,  
While I triumph o'er a secret wrung from nature's close reserve,  
In you come with your cold music till a creep thro' every nerve.

## XII

Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned:  
"Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.

The soul, doubtless, is immortal – where a soul can be discerned. (31-36)

The battle and balance between reason and an emotional reaction to the beautiful and artistic is significant here, not because Browning defines either one as the dominant faction but because he pointedly does not, thus implying that human existence is, necessarily, comprised of both. This suggestion resonates, particularly in the context of the concluding line of the twelfth stanza, which revisits the idea of the need to be the architect of one's own soul through an authentic exploration of human existence. Again we have the void-like punctuation symbolizing both possible and existent emptiness almost directly preceding the word "soul". Furthermore, the immediately preceding stanzas deal with images of Venetian frivolity, which, on the surface, would seem to harmonize with Browning's advocacy of self-development through experience. However, there is an aura of scepticism and irony in these descriptions that appear to imply that the poetic voice is suspicious of the depth and authenticity of such actions.

## IX

Oh, they praised you, I dare say!

"Brave Galuppi! that was music! Good alike at grave and gay!

I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!" (25-27)

The trivial equation of "grave" and "gay", entrenched by the alliteration, and the glaringly inadequate adjective "Good" for Galuppi's music seems to denote the

essential shallowness of the audience's appreciation and condition, as does the subsequent stanza:

### X

Then they left you for their pleasure: till in due time, one by one,  
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,  
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun. (28-30)

The description of "Death" as tacit recalls us to the recurrent motif of the synonymous nature of silence and death, insofar as silence is frequently either a hallmark of mortality or a prelude to it. The implication seems to be that the evolution of an authentic soul is not to be accomplished through cheap transgressions so much as through the annexing of the kind of intensity of feeling and purpose that enables a quintessentially immoral act to transcend itself.

Ultimately, the poetic voice appears to juxtapose the weight of Galuppi's sustaining consciousness and artistry with the more ephemeral Venetians, and yet it does so with a relish for detail and an emphasis on the gorgeousness of the spectacle that makes us sense a certain longing to be part of that other mode of existence as well.

### XIII

"Yours for instance: you know physics, something of geology,  
Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree;  
Butterflies may dread extinction, - you'll not die, it cannot be!

#### XIV

“As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,  
Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop:  
What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop? (37-42)

The speaker seems to be advocating intellectual pursuits, as well as artistic ones, which harmonizes with what we previously recognized as Browning's emphasis on the need for communication in the context of romantic relationships. “What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?” (42) is a question to which silence somehow has to be the answer. These metaphorical “Butterflies” of humanity have need to “dread extinction” because their mode of living is largely defined by its transience. They create nothing beyond their own ephemeral beauty, which is not made of the more elemental materials required to fashion artistic immortality. And yet the individual to whom the music of Galuppi speaks so vividly seems almost to long to be a portion of this fleeting throng. He derives pathos rather than pleasure from the fact this variety of beauty has been formed in order to fade and can certainly never populate his own existence. It is as though Browning is demonstrating, through this strangely undefined and obscure speaker, that there is more than one way to inhabit existence and generate beauty. Some of those ways are necessarily trivial but it may be that they offer another kind of illumination, not the grandeur of Shelley's mountains or the artistry of Galuppi's toccata, but something more reminiscent of an occasional shaft of sunlight

between a span of trees:

XV

“Dust and ashes!” So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.

Dear dead women, with such hair, too – what’s become of all the gold

Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old. (43-45)

The decision to place the word “gold” at the end of the penultimate line engenders a double implication. On the one hand the enjambment functions in an ordinary fashion but, on the other, the empty space left upon the page following it seems to remind us of all the unpopulated expanse of human potential, for which “gold” stands as a euphemism. Michael O’Neil observed that, “The wondering question aches with loss, pointed up by the way the voice trails across the properly enjambed line in this poem of fifteen stanzas each with fifteen syllables. But it speaks, too, of value, of an entwining of riches (gold) and eros whose vanishing leaves the speaker finishing on a note that is downcast and sombre, but also suspended”.<sup>134</sup> More than any of Browning’s poems that we have previously encountered this feels like a poetry of true mourning, a mourning for a past inhabited by people who have lived life not wisely but still so vividly, and the implied concern is that the passage of time may have robbed human existence of colour without enriching its essence. The vitality of the departed that is exhibited

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<sup>134</sup>Michael O’Neill, Mark Sandy, and Sarah Wootton. *Venice And The Cultural Imagination*. London: Pickering & Chatto Publishers, 2012. p. 93.

in the “dead women” of “A Toccata of Galuppi’s” is similar to what we have previously encountered in “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess”. The richness of the description and the allusion to “all the gold / Used to hang and brush their bosoms?” lends a magnificent vibrancy to these vanished women that again contrasts strongly with the more muted depiction of the speaker who, though still alive, feels only, “chilly and grown old.” The fact of death, in “A Toccata of Galuppi’s” being personified as a tacit entity should also remain with us, “Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.” The vitality of deceased figures is the closest we come to speech and death co-existing in Browning’s poetry. At no point do we encounter an example of a posthumous explanation or offering, perhaps because it is essential to Browning’s notion of justice that there exist certain absolutes or boundaries that cannot be compromised. If silence is the state to which we shall all ultimately be consigned, then the implicit dictate is, “Speak now.” The reference in the preceding line to the “lives that came to nothing” and “the deeds as well undone,” seems only to further highlight the emphasis that Browning places upon the here and now and the necessity of a fierce commitment to human fulfilment. Michael O’Neill writes:

But it is Browning’s way to entwine opposites in the smotheringly vigorous hullabaloo of his diction and the intricate rhyming and syntactical patterns of his verse. In ‘By the Fire-Side, Browning suggests how closely success in love approaches failure; in ‘Two in the Campagna,’ he evokes the ephemeral nature of

the ‘good minute’, bobbing towards and away from the speaker like thistledown caught in the wind. ‘In a Gondola’ affirms passionate love has value in the face of patriarchal tyranny by subjecting it to tense interrogation through the very way it utters itself; love must battle past its own self-caricature, brush against its ironizing shadow self, the perverse, the cruel and the possessive. The form mimics the battle: tightly enjambed rhymes keep coiling, unrolling, revealing. Above all, true to Browning’s ethic of commitment to experience, one most startlingly if coolly evident in ‘The Statue and the Bust’, ‘In a Gondola’ discovers in Venice a place in which the woman is able to mock her enemies as unable to die ‘because they never lived’:<sup>135</sup>

This understanding makes reference to some poems not addressed in this study but it nonetheless crystallises the essential notion that life must be done in the active sense, a thought that is intrinsic to the dichotomous response of the speaker in “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”. It may be that the speaker’s reluctance to judgmentally dismiss the ghostly figures that the music conjures for him is because he recognizes that, in their own imperfect fashion, they have succeeded in attaining a particular fullness of existence that still evades him or, perhaps equally importantly for Browning, they have not permitted instinct to go to waste. Certainly instinct is not everything, but it is more substantive in the world of

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<sup>135</sup>Michael O’Neill, Mark Sandy, and Sarah Wootton. *Venice And The Cultural Imagination*. London: Pickering & Chatto Publishers, 2012. p. 87.



Browning's poetry than a reticence born out of misplaced piety. The passage also recalls us to the idea of the shadow-self created by the pursuance of an injudicious and deformed understanding of love of the kind that we saw in "Porphyria's Lover" and touches upon how all good things have the capacity to mutate into their own antithesis. It may be that this is the opposite of the creative force of the silence of music in "A Toccata of Galuppi's". By doing and living love wrongly, one inevitably finds oneself the envoy and emblem of love's only opposites: hate and death.

Whatever similarities of theme and imagery that exist between "A Toccata of Galuppi's" and the previous dramatic monologues we have considered, however, we must remind ourselves that the architecture of this poem, and the philosophical pathos that ensues, is born out of the reverie of a silent auditor. The notion of a silent speaker is a contradiction that is somehow made possible only against the backdrop of music. Francis O'Gorman writes:

The composer's [Galuppi's] apparent self-expression has been scattered into the voices and minds of others, as if the keyboard piece is an act of multiple ventriloquism of real speakers. Sound becomes visualized and verbalized sense (though we know that the speaker has never been to Venice and so what he 'sees' can only be the reproduction of what he has seen and read elsewhere). Browning's text offers a temptation: an invitation to think this is how music *can* be understood, but the poem cannot dispense with a silent question – the

characteristic of Browning's dramatic monologues is that they all hold up speech for scrutiny of assumptions and attitudes – about whether the speaker's imagination is all-too-active, all-too-verbal-and-visual in its reception of sound. Perhaps music should really be heard in quite a different way.<sup>136</sup>

The question of which came first, music or linguistic articulation, and the extent to which the one may be grasping after the other, is at issue. In this same essay, O'Gorman alludes to what Charles Darwin called the "true musical cadences" in *The Descent of Man*, and the extent to which he thought "music was the literal origin of verbal language".<sup>137</sup> O'Gorman suggests that Browning, "was intrigued by the persisting human efforts to make music comprehensible in language really used by men, and his dramatic monologues open up such efforts to view."<sup>138</sup> I would suggest that it is the very impossibility of making music comprehensible in language that is what attracts Browning to the concept and structure of "A Toccata of Galuppi's". O'Gorman's thought is a too literal and constricting means of understanding the purpose for which music is employed in this poem. It is for extricating oneself from familiar landscapes and modes of expression through the evocative nature of a wordless cadence, and finding unfamiliar locations of time and place that may ultimately illuminate undiscovered aspects of the self. Stefan

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<sup>136</sup>Francis O'Gorman. "On Not Hearing: Victorian Poetry and Music". *Oxford Handbook Of Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. p. 754.

<sup>137</sup>Francis O'Gorman. "On Not Hearing: Victorian Poetry and Music". *Oxford Handbook Of Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. p. 753.

<sup>138</sup>Francis O'Gorman. "On Not Hearing: Victorian Poetry and Music". *Oxford Handbook Of Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. p.754.

Hawlin has suggested that, “The sensual loveliness of eighteenth-century Venice is an intense and self-forgetting experience.”<sup>139</sup> I would allow for the intensity but say rather that it is through music the speaker-listener of the poem is able to become the architect of his own surroundings and liberate previously obscured portions of his soul. There is a suggestion of wishing to shed more staid and familiar aspects of the self, perhaps, but it is more a question of self-discovery than forgetfulness. The poem consequently carries with it a deep sense of longings uncovered too late and a vague, unformed feeling of inadequacy over the unvisited portions of self and soul. It is the very wordlessness of this music that renders this possible; such a scope of personalized interpretation would be prohibited by the less malleable nature of language, which has an established translation of its own. Browning is not looking to explain or capture music through language, rather he is comprehending music as a means to explore what language alone cannot annex. Ultimately, he illuminates the possibilities of a medium that brings cadence without language in order to explore the previously silent spaces of the soul and enable, “a man of science... to engage in an act of imagination.”<sup>140</sup>

The lilting improbability of Browning’s choice of form in “A Toccata of Galuppi’s” is the final thing that should be considered. Although extraordinarily difficult, being comprised of fifteen stanzas each with fifteen syllables, the

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<sup>139</sup> Daniel Karlin. “Browning’s Poetry of Intimacy”. Browning, Robert. *Robert Browning’s Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007.p. 623.

<sup>140</sup> Stefan Hawlin. “Browning’s ‘A Toccata of Galuppi’s’”. Browning, Robert. *Robert Browning’s Poetry*. Ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Strauffer. Norton & Company, 2007. p. 627.

impression produced is one of rhythmic escalation.<sup>141</sup> What Browning has achieved is the removal of any sense of laboured contrivance, even though the musicality of the poem is dependent on a meticulous structuring. Like the speaker-listener with his vague allusions to musical theory, the technicalities must not intrude upon the imagination, even if they are what has enabled it to attain such an unfettered condition. The apparent effortlessness of the poem's cadence is thus both difficult and deeply necessary and the closest Browning comes to creating a synthesis of language and music through poetry. As O'Neill observes, "The poem mimics a toccata, a touch piece designed to show off the composer's virtuosity."<sup>142</sup> Like a touch piece, Browning has aimed at the impression of improvisation and in doing so has achieved a simplicity born out of enormous sensitivity to detail.

Ultimately the role of silence in Browning's dramatic monologues is as essential as it is varied and evasive. Silence can be the prelude to a miscommunication that ruptures truth, or the means by which truth may be elicited. It may threaten to engulf language almost in the same breath that it makes language more possible. Its nature is contradictory, but it is a contradiction that reminds us that all things must participate with their antithesis. One might say it is characteristic of Browning that he is able to channel this most mysterious and enigmatic essential with such practical precision, and illuminate to us all the modes of silence that go into the making of a speech.

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<sup>141</sup>Michael O'Neill, Mark Sandy, and Sarah Wootton. *Venice And The Cultural Imagination*. London: Pickering & Chatto Publishers, 2012.p. 93

<sup>142</sup>Michael O'Neill, Mark Sandy, and Sarah Wootton. *Venice And The Cultural Imagination*. London: Pickering & Chatto Publishers, 2012. p. 90.

## Chapter 5

### **“His mind moves upon silence”: Silence in the individual and the unknown in the poetry of W.B. Yeats.**

In Harold Bloom’s succinctly titled and enviably written book *Yeats*, the author observes that:

Yeats’s vibrant advantage over every modern poet – Rilke, Valery, Stevens, to name only the greatest – is the constant impression that he is rendering the thing itself, the passionate moment in all its immediacy. It is a quality (or a magician’s trick) that Yeats shares with Browning, and indeed may have been learned from Browning. Yeats confessed that Browning’s influence was a dangerous one for him. I take this to mean that Browning’s concentration on the “good moment” has a way of draining the tragic element out of life.”<sup>143</sup>

The classification “modern poet” and its relationship to the idea of Yeats’s simultaneous identification with, and reaction against, the depiction of the “‘good moment’” in Browning, is a complex one. Chronologically, Yeats would seem to fall roughly within the scope of the modernist epoch and yet the mood and fabric of his poetry, to say nothing of its structure, is often far from being *of* it. Indeed, to

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<sup>143</sup>Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p. 66.

the extent that Modernism can be understood in terms of the substitution of the pragmatic for the illusory - the human for the spiritual – as well as the stark and exploratory delineation of the landscape of human emotions, Yeats's poetry strikes an inharmonious chord. At this point we should pause to acknowledge that an understanding of the concept and contours of modernity versus Modernism is no easy task since, as Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane have observed in their essay, "The Name and Nature of Modernism", "the world of criticism has settled for some variant of collocation of the word 'modern' to identify the arts of its time, or if not all of them, then some part of them."<sup>144</sup> This promiscuity in the application of the term "modern" to the seismic shifts in cultural epochs could be extended to encompass the poetry of Yeats, since it certainly offers the essential newness denoted by it. However the extent to which Yeats's poetry can be understood as Modernist is more problematic. Of the nature of Modernism, and concept of applying classifying terminology to an epoch, Bradbury and McFarlane have the following to say:

When we speak of the style of an age, we can mean two very different things. We can mean that "general form of the forms of thought" of which Alfred North Whitehead spoke, which affects all a period's writing and is "so translucent... that only by extreme effort can we become aware of it". But we can also mean a

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<sup>144</sup>Malcolm Bradbury and James Walter McFarlane. *Modernism, 1890-1930*. London: Penguin Books, 1991.p. 21.

conscious mannerism, elected by some writers and artists though not by all, which expresses “a prevailing, dominant, or authentically contemporary view of the world by those artists who have most successfully intuited the quality of human experience peculiar to their day and who are able to phrase this experience in a form deeply congenial to the thought, science, and technology which are part of that experience”. The term ‘Modernism’ can hardly be taken in the former sense; for in any working definition of it we shall have to see in it a quality of abstraction and highly conscious artifice, taking us behind familiar reality, breaking away from familiar functions of language and conventions of form. It could be said that this is simply its initial shock, stage one of movement that leads us all into Modernism. And one can argue, to a point, that in graphics, architecture, design, and especially in the conventions of media like film and television, Modernism has become an invisibly communal style. Yet in some ways this is to defeat Modernism’s presumption; the shock, the violation of expected continuities, the element of de-creation and crisis, is a crucial element *of* the style. It has been more commonly urged that Modernism is our style in the second sense; these are the artistic forms consequent on modern thought, modern experience, and hence the Modernist writers and artists express the highest distillation of twentieth-century artistic potential. But many twentieth-century artists have rejected the label and the associated aesthetics, the modes of abstraction, discontinuity, and shock. And it can be well argued that the twentieth-century artistic tradition is made up, not of

one essential strand, but of two – roughly antithetical, though meeting from time to time.<sup>145</sup>

To see Yeats's poetry as a "shock" and "violation of expected continuities" may be to inflict upon it a too conscious sense of deviation. Undoubtedly it does surprise and it does deviate, and it cannot be said to be part of a collective circumspection arriving at a consensus, but it does not achieve these things through any apparent determination to evade belonging. Rather we might say that the emotional personality of Yeats's poetry is such that he was aware of the impossibility of it belonging to any group that outnumbers the self (the nature of "self" was after all, in light of Yeats's doctrine of the Mask, a comparatively populous condition for the poet).<sup>146</sup> Yeats wrote of his own poetry, "It was a long time before I had made a language to my liking; I began to make it when I discovered some twenty years ago that I must seek, not as Wordsworth thought, words in common use, but a powerful and passionate syntax, and a complete coincidence between period and stanza. Because I need a passionate syntax for passionate subject-matter I compel myself to accept these traditional metres that have developed with the language. Ezra Pound, Turner, Lawrence wrote admirable

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<sup>145</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, and James Walter McFarlane. *Modernism, 1890-1930*. London: Penguin Books, 1999.p. 24.

<sup>146</sup> Yeats's concept of the Doctrine of the Mask, as it pertains to the role of silence in his poetry, will be considered more precisely in the following chapter.



free verse, I could not. I would lose myself, become joyless”.<sup>147</sup> Thus Yeats does not so much intellectually distance himself from the shifts in, or abandonments of, form and style that are the hallmarks of the movement to which much of his poetry runs parallel; he understands it as an emotional necessity. It might be that Yeats would have been perfectly capable of producing what could be understood as a truly Modernist piece of verse, provided the process of creation had never been infiltrated by the concept of Modernism. The notion of the “invisibly communal style” of which Bradbury and Mcfarlane speak is perhaps the closest we can come to viewing Yeats as a part of the movement itself. Certainly, there are anxieties and concerns of disintegration that he shares with it, but the nature of his poetry is such that it would become orphaned were it ever to find a home. It seems as well to establish this understanding of Yeats’s position, or anti-position, in the canon if we are to effectively comprehend the larger importance, philosophical and functional, that silence has in his poetry, as well as the chronological arc that this study aims to follow.

Returning to the relationship between Yeats’s and Browning’s poetry, as analysed by Bloom, this strange condition of an impassioned emotional isolation in Yeats plays into our understanding of the distinctions between the two poets. There is an ecstatic and emotionally personal quality in Yeats’s poetry that forms a contrast with Browning’s satirical emotional intelligence. Certainly there is

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<sup>147</sup>W.B Yeats. *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, And Prose*. Ed. James Pethica. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000. p. 309.

passion in Browning but it is often filtered through irony and housed in a form so deliberate as to divest it of the spasm of probing frenzy that, for Yeats, seems intrinsic to composition. Yeats is undoubtedly no less analytical or forthright than Browning was but there is a resonance and a perversely sustaining fragility to his emotional palate that serves as both a substitution for, and partial reaction against, his predecessor's fervent, albeit empathetic, condemnation of human weakness. Even when addressing pragmatic or militaristic concerns of the present day there is an un-worldliness or, on occasion, even an 'other-worldliness' to Yeats that seems to traverse the boundaries of Gnosticism. Bloom writes that, "Gnosticism derives from the ancient Persian dualism, and its exaltation of the Shadow exactly suited Yeats's temperament, for Yeats was always painfully aware of his own divided consciousness, as against his father's natural unity of being, and so was disposed to welcome any doctrine that sanctified division of the self."<sup>148</sup> Yeats's impulse to sanitize his own sense of duality by understanding it through an existent spiritualism is characteristic of a simultaneous attachment to, and suspicion of, his condition. It may be that, for Yeats, poetry was both the practical use for and result of this internal schism, an idea that shall be further addressed in the following chapter in the context of Yeats's doctrine of the Mask. For the moment, however, it is enough to acknowledge a quality in his poetry that indicates a rift in consciousness, born out of a desire to keep what he also suspects should be curbed. Putting it simplistically, Yeats's poetry could be said to protect

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<sup>148</sup> Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p. 75.

precisely the impractical conditions and reflexes of consciousness that much of Browning's poetry seeks to *correct*. Thus, in quintessential terms, he appears less 'modern' than Browning (despite being more recent), but in a fashion that neither dilutes nor diminishes his particular poetic currency. In light of this it is also constricting to view Yeats as a bridge between modernism and what preceded it, since the vicissitudes of his poetry make him appear alternately older and younger than that which came before, and never wholly a dimension of either. The implication of collective momentum contained within the idea also seems inexpertly tailored to the contours of Yeats's poetic motivations. It is this peculiar exemption from canonical classification, as much as his relationship to the poetry of Browning and – on both a related and autonomous level - Shelley, that renders Yeats so indispensable a figure in this study.<sup>149</sup> The nature of silence in his poetry seems itself to be born out of his simultaneous separation from, and relationship to, the chronological arc we have so far travelled and it is this simultaneity of apparently mutually contradicting elements that will prove fundamental to an understanding of the significance of silence in Yeats.

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<sup>149</sup> With reference to Shelley, Blake and Browning, in the context of Yeats's anxiety of poetic influence, Bloom affirms, "The poet, if he could, would be his own precursor, and so rescue the Muse from her degradation. In this sense, poetic influence is analogous to Romantic love;" The suggestion is that Yeats resisted poetic influence with a more heightened determination than many other poets. I would affirm (and Bloom seems tacitly to concur) that this was due to an instinct on the part of the poet (Yeats) that his particular artistry would be somehow diminished were it to be located as a portion of a wider tradition. Rather, his poetic voice must be immediately recognizable for what it is, *regardless* of wider context. (Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. pp. 4-5 and pp. 11-14).

The relationship between silence, language and the creative impulse in his work is nowhere more clearly exhibited than in Yeats's "Long Legged Fly". It is a poem concerned with what can be termed the 'pre-history moment': the period immediately before creation that illuminates what is required to engender its realization. In Judeo-Christian terms the three scenarios depicted throughout can be seen as microcosmic of Genesis 1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."<sup>150</sup> Certainly the poem's refrain – "Like a long-legged fly upon a stream / His mind moves upon silence." (9-10) - conjures the idea and image of something manifesting itself out of nothing. The concept of a paradoxically populated and substantive 'nothing' is a recurrent theme in Yeats that will be further explored in the subsequent chapter through a consideration of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* in the poet's *Mythologies*. Here, however, it is enough to observe that, as with the formless form of the dark and empty cosmos in Genesis 1, the pre-history moment of the three architects of society and art (Caesar, Helen of Troy and Michelangelo) is fashioned out of a fertile silence. The allusion to "the stream" also recalls us to the culminating portion of the Poet's quest for the essence of the creative force in *Alastor*. It is a reference that seems tacitly to suggest that the refrain is applicable to Yeats's own poetic creations. There is, however, less of the frenetic urgency

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<sup>150</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. New York: Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1959. Genesis 1:1.

and un-moderated fervour than we found in *Alastor*: “ ‘Vision and Love!’” / The Poet cried aloud, ‘I have beheld / The path of thy departure. Sleep and death / Shall not divide us long!’” (366-369). Instead the surge towards creative realization is shrunk to the momentum of alliteration, “Like a long-legged... mind moves...”. The effect may be less grandiose than Shelley, but is no less potent or evocative.

The first stanza of the poem enforces the notion of an almost tangible “silence” with the image of a visible “nothing”:

That civilization may not sink  
Its great battle lost,  
Quiet the dog, tether the pony  
To a distant post.  
Our master Caesar is in the tent  
Where the maps are spread,  
His eyes fixed upon nothing,  
A hand under his head. (1-8)

The avoidance of the loss of civilization appears to be conditional upon the silencing of “the dog” and the removal of the “pony” to a “distant post”. The stage is being cleared and quieted in a fashion that seems simultaneously monumental and absurdly trivial. On the one hand the reader, through the privileged lenses of hindsight, may recognize the momentum of inevitability. On the other hand, Yeats is hinting at the uncomfortable recognition that the merest shift in the condition of

the pre-history moment could have altered the entire fabric of history itself. The use of the diminutive “pony”, rather than ‘horse’, seems to particularly enforce this idea and to insinuate that even the most innocuous detail has the capacity to fracture apparently immovable foundations. There is an almost Darwinian evolutionary quality to the idea that the slightest shift in the alignment of circumstances could engender an alternative reality to that which we now experience. Indeed, through this simple image, Yeats seems to offer us a glimpse of the myriad dark and silent alternate universes that light and sound will never penetrate. Such an interpretation stresses the accidental and circumstantial element of the scenario but we must also recollect the element of participation, the extent to which Caesar actively transmutes the “nothing” upon which his eyes are fixed into the something that engenders history. It is as though, in the silence and nothing of a single stanza, Yeats offers the duality of accident and design and encourages the reader to ponder to what extent the two go into the making of the world we see, hear and know.

The second stanza offers us a privileged insight into the condition and demeanour of the predominantly pre-pubescent Helen of Troy:

That the topless towers be burnt  
And that men recall that face,  
Move most gently if move you must  
In this lonely place.  
She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,

That nobody looks; her feet

Practice a tinker shuffle

Picked up on the street. (11-18)

A collective term for the three individuals around whom the galaxy of the poem moves might be “genius”, since each is a genius in their own sphere, be it the military, the sexual, or the artistic, and are chosen deliberately for that reason. Here we have the genius of the second stanza, Helen of Troy, depicted in silent isolation so that the poet may again draw attention to the unpopulated condition of the pre-history moment, “this lonely place”. There is a simultaneous and juxtaposing ethereality and earthiness to the silent figure thinking, “that nobody looks” and practising the steps of a dance, the most salient characteristic of which is a lack of sexuality: “tinker shuffle”. The word “shuffle” itself seems starkly improbable as a descriptive adjective for the movements of the “face that launched a thousand ships” (Act V, Scene i) and yet we must recall that this is Helen before she was the Helen out of which epics were fashioned.<sup>151</sup> Innocence is likewise not an adjective that might automatically be applied to this iconic catalyst of sexually generated warfare but here Yeats is showing us a Helen whose innocence far outstrips that of reader and poet, both of whom cannot help but observe her through the discoloration of foreknowledge.

The image leads seamlessly into the opening of the third stanza and the allusion to pubescent girls’ inevitable development:

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<sup>151</sup> Christopher Marlowe. *Dr Faustus*. Ed. Roma Gill. London: A & C Black, 1989.

That girls at puberty may find  
The first Adam in their thought,  
Shut the door to the Pope's chapel,  
Keep those children out. (21-24)

The impression evoked is that of the invisible garden of internal sexual awakening and yet this process of maturity seems, peculiarly, to be predicated on an exclusion from knowledge, "Keep those children out". The strangely arbitrary determination to prevent the children from viewing Michelangelo's masterpiece suggests a resurgence of an Eden-like advocacy of ignorance.<sup>152</sup> The thought serves as a stopping-point on the road to the depiction of the silent Michelangelo in the process of creating and reminds us that, without Adam and Eve's initial flouting of a divine injunction, humankind might have remained forever incarcerated within the pre-history moment. The choice of Michelangelo then seems pointed beyond the consideration of his genius. The sexual content of much of his work and the sinuous depiction of the disrobed human body, some of which is to be found upon the famous ceiling under which he lies in the poem, all enters into the paradox of the need to preserve innocence so that images of what will eventually annihilate it can be created. So much of knowledge is preceded by a deliberate silence and, as already observed, it was through the initial exercise of defiance on the part of Eve and Adam (the names should be placed in that order) that freewill was born, which

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<sup>152</sup> Yeats was, technically, an Irish Anglican, although ultimately more of an unclassifiable spiritualist by the time of this poem. There appears, in "Long-Legged Fly", to remain a flicker of a need to disassociate from Catholic doctrine, if not from Catholic aesthetics. (Richard Ellmann. *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. New York: Macmillan Co. 1999. p. 252)



in turn led to human history, from the campaigns of Caesar, to the cataclysmic sexuality of Helen, to the artistry of Michelangelo. Without it history itself must, like the pre-Genesis cosmos, have been formless and silent. Essentially, “Long-Legged Fly” is not a poem of the unlived moment so much as it is of the unknown moment; the moment *about* which history is silent but *without* which history would not exist.

The impetus of the poem, however, is less pragmatic than it is in the poems by Browning explored in previous chapters insofar as Yeats is not prescribing ideal behavioural modes or solutions. Indeed the silence of “Long-legged Fly”, while it may function as a prelude to action, is not, by extension, emblematic of inaction. Rather it is pre-creational and thus an immanent element of that which will come to eclipse it. Essentially, its fabric appears more reminiscent of the silence we encountered in Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* and *Alastor*, insofar as there is something organic and fundamental to it that is inextricably bound up in the natural world. Certainly it is no accident that the recurring image is one of a “long-legged fly upon a stream”. Like Shelley, Yeats seems to feel that our innate capacity for invention is inexorably associated with our relationship to nature. It is in such moments that we seem to experience Yeats’s own configuration of spirituality, which proves to be one where the architecture wrought by human genius and human action is itself a kind of transcendence, a thing that engenders form where before there was only formlessness and for which a language must be fashioned rather than merely picked up like a handful of haphazard pebbles upon a

beach, “It was a long time before I had made a language to my liking.”<sup>153</sup> Thus we may come to see Yeats as the fourth unnamed and yet presiding genius of the poem, since it is through his language that such moments are given voice, and it is because of such moments that a voice may come to be created.

Yeats’s anxiety regarding the arc of existence for the exceptional individual (which is inexorably tied up with the question of the unknowable nature of the afterlife) is perhaps most clearly exhibited through his depiction of the superlative mythological Irish hero, Cuchulain, in his posthumous state in “Cuchulain Comforted”. It is a poem that provides particularly fertile ground when considered in the context of what we encountered in “Long-Legged Fly” with regard to the relationship between silence, the extraordinary individual and the physical world.

A man that had six mortal wounds, a man

Violent and famous, strode among the dead;

Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone (1-3)

Immediately the emphasis of the poem is upon “mortal” imagery and the extent to which Cuchulain still maintains the hallmarks of his corporeal self. The combination of the worldly characteristics of physically and notoriety with his assured, expansive gait render him more substantial than the ephemeral “eyes” that observe him, just as his complete state contrasts with this watchful synecdoche.

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<sup>153</sup>W.B Yeats. *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, And Prose*. Ed. James Pethica. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000. p. 309.

Bloom explicates Yeats's complex attitude to the nature of the afterlife in the following terms:

"My body is part of the world which my thoughts can change," Lichtenstein remarks, in making much the same point that Yeats makes about the Husk.<sup>154</sup> Husk is sense in sense's aspect of impulses and images, which shape the body and make it the manifestation of the unconscious, as a phenomenological psychiatrist might say, or of a transcendental superego, as the occultist Yeats in effect would say.

The objects of sense come together in the Passionate Body, the transcendental form of the Mask or questing libido. But, whereas the Faculties find their union in the Mask, the Principles cannot find theirs in the Passionate Body, for the conflict of the Principles is revelatory but not creative, and the Passionate Body remains always a manifold of sensations, subject to natural entropy.

Though a touch strained as symbolism, these first two Principles are not difficult to apprehend. But Spirit and Celestial Body, eternal mind and its object, are much more opaque to the understanding than eternal sense and its object. Partly this is because they dominate the world of the dead or, as Yeats terms it, "period between lives,"<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> "Husk is sense in sense's aspects of impulses and images, which shape the body and make it the manifestation of the unconscious, as a phenomenological psychiatrist might say, or of a transcendental superego, as the occultist Yeats would say." (Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p. 264.)

<sup>155</sup> Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. pp. 264- 265.

The poem “Cuchulain Comforted”, as we shall see, reveals a fundamental anxiety in Yeats’s consciousness about the extent to which the loss of certain human aspects of selfhood may have an effect upon the eternal dimensions of the self. The poem is suffused with a paradoxical unease at being in company where one ought not to belong, and yet recognizing that this is nonetheless where one is supposed to be. Yeats seems to nurture a latent and ineradicable unease that the loss of the passionate body may have unknown repercussions. The problematic duality in this instance appears to be the impulse to retain what he recognizes he is intended to shed. The poet’s mind is moving over the silent, empty space of an eternity that cannot be comprehended by his still human consciousness, and that terrifies as much as it entices, insofar as it forces the recognition that the inevitable sea-change in the soul may be something that, in his human state, he would resist. I say “he” because, as we shall see, there is a sense of identification between Yeats and his subject that recalls us to the question of the outstanding, destiny-shaping individuals of “Long-Legged Fly”.

Returning then to the specifics of the poem, the second stanza further entrenches the collective and transient nature of the “Shrouds” while also suggesting that Cuchulain’s internal concerns remain bound up with the mortal sphere:

Then certain Shrouds that muttered head to head  
Came and were gone. He leant upon a tree  
As though to meditate on wounds and blood. (4-6)

This apparent preoccupation with mortality on the part of a hero now inhabiting the afterlife is strongly reminiscent of the figure of Achilles in Homer's *The Odyssey* when he protests, "No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus! / By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man - / some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive – than rule down here over all the breathless dead." (Book 11.547–558).<sup>156</sup> Although the Shrouds do not remain silent, there is initially no definition to their speech but only formless muttering. This contrasts with the peculiar authority of Cuchulain's silence, which resonates both because of its divergence and its individuality. It is a silence forged out of the same sense of otherness from which Yeats fashioned his poetic language.

The first hint at the intended corrosion of this individuality comes in the immediately following stanzas:

A Shroud who seemed to have authority  
Among those bird-like things came, and let fall  
A bundle of linen. Shrouds by two and three  
  
Came creeping up because the man was still.  
And thereupon that linen-carrier said  
'Your life can grow much sweeter if you will

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<sup>156</sup>Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Group, 2006.

‘Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud; (7-13

The poem achieves its initial effect of a spectral undermining of heroism through the contrast between the “creeping”, insinuating forms of the Shrouds and the silent, striding Cuchulain, as well as the sinister irony of the allusion to “life” in the first words uttered in the poem. The disingenuous nature of the observation seems indicative of an attempt to render more palatable that which ought to be resisted. There can be no question of sweetening the condition of Cuchulain’s “life” since he no longer inhabits it. What remains to be defined is the condition of his afterlife, which the Shrouds appear to intend should not resemble what came before:

Mainly because of what we only know

The rattle of those arms makes us afraid.

‘We thread the needles’ eyes and all we do

All must together do.’ (14-17)

Most notable here is the Shroud’s allusion to fear of the rattling arms that will be ameliorated once they are covered. And yet the capacity for fear of physicality is not in harmony with what we know of Cuchulain, a fact which suggests that the Shroud’s impetus is not to alleviate his inevitable response so much as to eclipse this distinction between Cuchulain and the collective dead. The emphasis is either upon a corrosion of individuality, and the adoption of a universal condition, or

upon the idea that the afterlife may require you to inhabit your antithetical self. With Yeats's characteristic duality, the poem encompasses both interpretations, and the need for recalibration is made that much more noticeable in the context of an heroic individual such as Cuchulain. M.L Rosenthal writes:

If there is a curtailed ambiguity in "Cuchulain Comforted," it is not because of unclear language or symbolism but because of the poem's sheer strangeness. Yeats has invented a Dantean setting and the situation within which the hero of the greatest Irish saga will enter a new phase of existence, a phase in which he will become one with the despised and cowardly denizens of the earth: an anonymous labourer, but also a bird-throated singer. It is the last step in the poet's reshaping of the Cuchulain-figure into an image containing within itself both its original epic heroism (re-embodied, in various passages of poems and plays, as all who have given themselves to the struggle for Irish freedom) and its subjective anti-self: fearful, self-analytical, ridden with guilt. Yeats, nearing death, begins to assimilate his own character and experiences to those of the hero whose symbolic nature he has brooded over and remoulded over so many years. He does not spell out this final link between Cuchulain and himself, although he perhaps hints as much in the image of the Shrouds patiently working to achieve whatever they are able to do.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup>M. L Rosenthal. *Running To Paradise*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.p. 140.

Rosenthal uncovers Yeats's fear that the afterlife will involve the un-making of heroes and, more terribly, an un-making achieved by a tacit triggering of the reasons that may motivate exceptional individuals to wish to be free of their own selfhood. The suggestion is that Cuchulain, and by extension Yeats, may have episodes in their mortal life for which they suspect they have merited a Dantean-like afterlife, a particular condition that constitutes a punishment for those qualities that engendered their worst errors. And yet with such figures as Cuchulain we cannot overlook the fact that their greatest transgressions were generated by those same impulses that gave rise to their greatest heroisms. Into the making of anyone who stands outside of the collective Yeats knows there are actions and beliefs of which the final version of the self might wish to be free, but that are inexorably part of that hard-won identity. Yeats is uncertain about the nature of the afterlife even as he appears not to doubt its existence. The result is a dual and subtle dread, not only that one might be separated from the salient points of one's identity but that one might come to wish to be.

The Shroud continues:

‘Now we sing and sing the best we can

But first you must be told our character:

Convicted cowards all by kindred slain

‘Or driven from home and left to die in fear’ (19-22)



Perhaps the most pertinent word of this extract is “our”, since it attests to the collective condition that the Shrouds require Cuchulain to adopt. That the condition in question is one of cowardice renders it the more incongruous with what we know of Cuchulain’s identity. However, since superlative bravery is what distinguished him from other men in life this is, necessarily, the characteristic that it is most essential for him to abdicate in death. It is also worth noting the apparent jibe in the allusion to “by kindred slain”, which evokes Cuchulain’s own inadvertent murder of his son.<sup>158</sup> Such a covert reference to the hero’s worst and most unpardonable deed is highly sinister in its evident intention to entice him into the shedding of his selfhood. Ultimately what seems to be aimed at is a symphony of sameness:

They sang but had nor human notes nor words,  
Though all was done in common as before,

They had changed their throats and had the throats  
of birds. (23-26)

The resolution of the poem quite literally affirms the eradication of the “human” element and depicts the chorus-like and synthesized condition of death. To an extent, this could appear emblematic of a fusing with the natural world and a return to a wordless, though un-silent and participant, state that is faintly akin to what we saw in Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* and encountered more literally in *Adonais*.

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<sup>158</sup>Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. pp. 114-115.

However, this does not account for the element of menace with which the poem is suffused, and the disingenuous, self-serving nature of the advocates of sameness. As suggested, “Cuchulain Comforted” exhibits Yeats’s profound ambivalence regarding the condition of death. Yeats, through his choice of the figure of Cuchulain, is examining the implications of the common fate of uncommon men and confronting the fear that all identities, no matter how exceptional, may be condemned to fuse into the general. More so than Shelley, Yeats seems to resist this fusion and to be troubled by it, a fact that causes the poem’s title to take on an ironic significance. “Cuchulain Un-made” might be a little closer to the truth, but it is the notion of finding a way by which the un-making would become a willing process that Yeats seems to tacitly bemoan. Although Cuchulain remains silent throughout the poem’s duration, and passes no comment on his fate, the mood is enough to suggest that Yeats himself derives no comfort from the notion that the unique voices of heroes and poets will permit themselves to be ingested by a chorus. I am reminded of Philomel, not as depicted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* but in Timberlake Wertenbaker’s play, *The Love of the Nightingale*, when, in her post-transformation condition as a nightingale, the heroine affirms that she “never liked birds”.<sup>159</sup> Certainly Yeats’s poem is not nearly as absolute in its anxieties as later twentieth-century poems like Larkin’s “Aubade” – “The sure extinction that we travel to / And shall be lost in always. Not to be here, / Not to be anywhere, / And

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<sup>159</sup>Timberlake Wertenbaker. *The Love Of The Nightingale ; And, The Grace Of Mary Traverse*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989.

soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.” (17-20)<sup>160</sup>. Yeats never could arrive at a point of imagining no afterlife but that is not to say that his post-mortal fears do not concern themselves with the eclipse of consciousness, language and individual identity. Cuchulain’s silence throughout the poem thus remains an ambiguous one seeming, on the one hand, like an assertion of his distinctiveness and, on the other, like a capitulation to the chorus that engulfs him. Ultimately, Yeats speculates a self-defeat, and even seems to endow it with a numb inevitability, but he can no more affirm it than he could deny it as a possibility.

Harold Bloom wrote of “Cuchulain Comforted”:

The great puzzle of this very authoritative poem, one of the most inevitable Yeats wrote, is why Cuchulain the hero finds himself among the cowards of the after-life. Part of the clue may be in the omitted group of “the prose theme.”<sup>161</sup> Is Yeats not, in this poem, facing his own, his human death, thinking that he will die, with some personal cowardice unknown? Yet this is the poet who stirringly asked the massive rhetorical question: “Why should we honour those that die upon the field of battle?” and added the magnificent explanation: “A man may show reckless courage in entering into the abyss of himself.” “Cuchulain Comforted” will always

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<sup>160</sup> Philip Larkin. *Collected Poems*. New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux. 2003.

<sup>161</sup> Immediately before this quote, Bloom tells us of Dorothy Wellesley’s account of “the prose theme” to “Cuchulain Comforted”, as she heard it from Yeats. “Dorothy Wellesley, in her account of Yeats’s last days, gives “the prose theme” of *Cuchulain Comforted*, as Yeats read it aloud to her. In it one of the shades says: ... you will like to know who we are. We are the people who run away from the battles. Some of us have been put to death as cowards, but others have hidden, and some even died without people knowing they were cowards...” (Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p. 462)

have the authority of mystery about it; Yeats chose to write it in his hieratic mode, and he found for it a tone of revelation imperfectly apprehended, a half-light that darkens into religion. What compels many readers of the poem is a sense of Yeats's own involvement here in the Last Things. Now, they seem to say, he enters into the abyss of himself.<sup>162</sup>

I would suggest that Yeats's particular cowardice is "unknown" only insofar as it is a cowardice relating to what he is acutely aware he *cannot* know; the role of language and the intellect, the cardinal components of his identity, in the eternal sphere. He is addressing the potential consequences of the fulfilment of his own post-mortal convictions and recognizing that belief itself is a reminder of how little can be truly comprehended. "A man may show reckless courage when entering into the abyss of himself", but having done so he may, like Cuchulain, find himself in alien surroundings.

"Cuchulain Comforted" is, as Bloom and Rosenthal so rightly reminds us, one of Yeats's last poems when the concept of mortality had begun to play upon a personal chord.<sup>163</sup> But what of the role that silence has in Yeats's poetry addressing issues associated with death when death was a less imminently personal concern? His 1919 elegy, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", like *Adonais*, is more a poem of mourning than of death itself. The distinction is a

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<sup>162</sup>Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p. 463.

<sup>163</sup>Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p. 463.

slight but essential one. In poetry of death we may encounter the deceased occupying a sphere that is, theoretically, independent of our imagination, as with “Cuchulain Comforted”. In poetry of mourning the poetic mourner may provide a sphere that is evidently tailored to the nature of the deceased (and designed to be emblematic of their merits and attributes), or simply bemoan the fact that their (the poet’s) capacity for credulity cannot encompass such a possibility. “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” is, as we have seen before in English elegy, a poem that seems to vacillate between the contrived and opportunistic, and the suddenly starkly sincere. Yeats had also clearly felt initially compelled to try his hand at pastoral elegy, as we see through his poem “Shepherd and Goatherd”.<sup>164</sup> Like Milton he also did not permit (once a reasonable option presented itself) any inadequacies or incongruities on the part of the subject to impede the construction of a more idealized poetic depiction.

The initial conceit that Yeats attempted on Gregory’s death was quintessentially pastoral but “Shepherd and Goatherd” is a catalogue of stilted conversational exchanges that remove the reader so far from the poem’s subject matter as to make it appear almost laughably contrived – “Sing, for it may be that your thoughts have plucked / Some medicinal herb to make our grief / Less bitter.” (86-89). Apparently unsatisfied with this, Yeats subsequently abandoned the pastoral elegiac style for “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”. Here, Gregory’s depiction as a superlative renaissance man - “Soldier, scholar, horseman, he, / As

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<sup>164</sup>Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p.193.

‘twere all life’s epitome.” (86-87) and, “Our Sydney and our perfect man,” (47) - is undoubtedly exaggerated. As Harold Bloom writes in *Yeats*, Gregory is “more of an Edward King than a Sydney”, and it is worth recollecting the Edward King was doubtless more himself than he was Lycidas.<sup>165</sup> Nonetheless two moments towards the end of the poem remain salient for their intensity (sincerity in elegy being almost impossible to verify or quantify), as well as their larger implied commentary on their relationship between silence, elegy and death in Yeats.

The first of these is the question, “What made us think that he could comb grey hair?” (88), which seems to testify to the bewilderment of language in the face of grief. Up until this point the poem has been primarily concerned with Gregory’s unfitness for death and comparative fitness for life. The opening stanzas of the poem address the more congruous relationship between death and a number of Yeats’s other deceased friends, Lionel Johnson, John Synge and George Pollexfen. When Yeats arrives at Gregory, however, he alludes to the comparative “discourtesy of death” (48) in the context of this, his “dear friend’s son” (46). Ultimately, however, Yeats seems to double back and fasten, not so much upon the incongruity of his subject’s demise, but on his peculiar fitness of it. The suggestion is that there is a quality of youthful immediacy to Gregory that renders him harmonious with life only for as long as he retains his youth. Youth, indeed, seems to be the essential aspect of his identity that, almost Cuchulain-like, Yeats is reluctant to see corroded. Thus death seems to be the more judicious result, insofar

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<sup>165</sup>Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p.193.

as it encapsulates Gregory in the state with which his identity is bound up. We see again the anxiety of a posthumous eradication of that which renders a person exceptional, but in “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” the thought still appears to be in its infancy, looking outwards upon the world rather than turning in upon the self. The notion of death being a fitting condition for the subject is reminiscent of Shelley’s conclusion in *Adonais* that, if death is the state in which Adonais finds himself then it must itself constitute a superior state. The distinction, however, seems again to be inextricably linked to Yeats’s preoccupation with identity and the most fundamental characteristic of the individual. If youth is what is required to make Gregory himself then youth is what he ought to retain. So death is more a means to an end than the end in itself that Shelley envisages for his Adonais. The fact of Gregory’s voice having been silenced in order to preserve an image suited to Yeats’s understanding and purpose seems to cause the poet very little anxiety. The silence of the unanswered question, however, and the space between it and the concluding stanza, reminds us of the abyss between life and death and magnifies the sombreness of Gregory’s demise, while still allowing for its peculiar judiciousness. It may be that an explanation as to the role that silence plays in Yeats’s apparent unease at the question of posthumous identity is merited here. It is a notion we have seen him explore through two entities defined largely by their physicality. The loss of language has not been shown as the saliently tragic element about the post-mortal conditions of either Cuchulain or Robert Gregory. For Yeats, however, anxiety as

to the role of language (his own hard won and painstakingly wrought language) after death is the salient element. In skirting the peripheries of that most essential terror we find ourselves in the company of individuals whose identity is bound up with the physical rather than the verbal, a fact which suggests that Yeats prefers the language of symbolism to a specific poetic confrontation with this profound concern.

Returning to “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” we cannot end a consideration of the poem without noting that, in Yeats’s poetic resolution, there is none of the triumphant resurgence that we experience in *Lycidas* or *Adonais*. And yet the concluding lines, which are the second of the two salient moments to which I previously referred, retain the hallmark of elegy in their determination to replace an enforced silence with a compensatory sound.

“but a thought

Of that late death took all my heart for speech.” (95-96)

We might suggest that the decision to end with speech, and the annexing of his own heart for that purpose, is the closest Yeats comes to explicating his own reflexive lurch towards language when confronted by the impermeable silence of death. Indeed, it is this impulse towards the vocal that seems most to highlight everything upon which Yeats has made the poem remain silent, lest it reveal too much of himself, to himself. The grammar of the line has always been difficult to decipher but, in light of what we have considered regarding Yeats’s simmering unease about the relationship between language and death, I suggest it can be



understood to mean that his heart was harnessed absolutely to a recognized need for speech.

Bloom suggests about this final stanza that, “His heart it took perhaps, but not his soul,”<sup>166</sup> and certainly much of the rhetoric and exaggeration of the poem diffuses the faint stench of opportunism. However, the impulse for language to fill the space left by bereavement is, as I have said, more than merely characteristic of Yeats. The impetus is less a reaction to the death of the subject than a dimension of the poet’s own relationship with inevitability. One might almost say that, for the Yeats, language and life may not be separated and that both together exist as death’s opposite.

Let us turn then to one of Yeats’s final poems, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”, which in fact concerns itself with the apparent winding down of Yeats’s own most essential human characteristic, his poetic voice.

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,  
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.  
Maybe at last, being but a broken man,  
I must be satisfied with my heart, (1-4)

This is a poem about the impossibility of further poetry, the theme itself being the inability to locate a theme, and the condition arrived at by the poet that renders this possible. Instead the poem serves as a revisitation of themes that previously captivated the Yeats, from his unrequited love for the actress and nationalist Maud

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<sup>166</sup>Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p.194.

Gonne, to Cuchulain's grief-stricken battle with the sea. The allusion to Maud Gonne proves an arresting one and is faintly reminiscent of Browning's "The Statue and the Bust", "And both perceived they had dreamed a dream." (153)

I thought my dear must her own soul destroy

So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,

And this brought forth a dream and soon enough

This dream itself had all my thought and love. (21-24)

George Bornstein wrote that Yeats, "developed a poetry of memory and loss, in which he sought to inject a Blakean and Shelleyan visionary power into a mode which Wordsworth and Tennyson had claimed as their own. How many great mature lyrics depend upon the recuperation of memory? The danger was that he, too, might lose intensity, might degenerate from passion into mere recollection. For the poet of the Maud Poems, of "Among School Children" or "The Circus Animals' Desertion" among other works, Verlaine's protest tolled a continual tocsin."<sup>167</sup>

In light of Bornstein's statement we might see "The Circus Animal's Desertion" as an attempt at the intensity of creation through recalibration, a relearning, rather than just a recollection, of a past and the figures in it that Yeats now knows he previously misunderstood. What the poet seems to be bemoaning is not precisely

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<sup>167</sup> Shortly before this quotation, Bornstein observed that, "Dropping his worry over Tennysonian impurities, Yeats became obsessed instead with the psychology that had created *In Memoriam*. For the forty years from 1896 onwards, he repeatedly cited Verlaine's aphorism that 'Tennyson is too noble, too *anglais*; when he should have been broken-hearted, he had many reminiscence.'" (George Bornstein. *Poetic Remaking*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988.p. 113).

the fact that reminiscence has come to be all that remains but rather that the nature of the reminiscence is discoloured by an inauthenticity he himself inflicted upon it. He cannot mourn his lost past as he might now wish because he knows himself to have been more enamoured of the images and ideas that it generated for him than of the thing itself. His physical existence became the unconscious (perhaps half-conscious) means of constructing an internal phantasmagoria where he only called by the same name the things that were a derivation of the reality. It is a realization that seems to dry up poetic expression and the despair of the poem seems to lie both in that fact and in the recognition that he has no real right to reminiscence, even when nothing else is left, since what he recollects is a mutation of the people and places that populate his memory.

It was the dream itself enchanted me:

Character isolated by a deed

To engross the present and dominate memory.

Players and painted stage took all my love

And not those things that they were emblems of. (28-32)

I said before that the transmuting of Maud Gonne into a dreamlike version of the woman she truly was recalls us to what we saw in Browning, but Yeats's failure could hardly be said to have manifested as the silence and inaction for which Browning indicts the lovers of his "The Statue and the Bust". The symmetry lies in the overarching nature of his obsession and the extent to which it came to obscure the real-life woman who initially provoked it. The fact that Yeats never

authentically attained the inspiration for his dream is perhaps compensated for by the fact that he did achieve the language for it. Martin Amis in his memoir *Experience* wrote of the poet Philip Larkin's inexpert fashion of living in the following terms, "Someone else would have had to get the goods and the sex. But Larkin did get the poems".<sup>168</sup> The thought is expressed with an offhand glibness about a poet who could hardly have been more philosophically or artistically different to Yeats, but the fabric of the idea strikes a harmonious chord. A lack of talent in the intensely human sphere of amorous conquests, and an attempt to put language to a practical use it could not quite navigate, is the essential point. The language Yeats was at such pains to create gave him the world of his poetry but could never quite bring him the worldly things he also sought. His compensations are obvious and sustaining but so is the gap left by that for which they are a compensation. This thought also renders more poignant the fact that Yeats now appears to feel that his language is running out or, at least, running down. Increasingly he seems to be becoming acutely aware of what we glimpsed in "Cuchulain Comforted" and more triumphantly, if no less forlornly, in Shelley's *Alastor*; the finite nature of poetic expression.

Those masterful images because complete  
Grew pure in mind but out of what began?  
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,  
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,

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<sup>168</sup> Amis, Martin. *Experience*. London: Vintage, 2001. p. 243.

Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut

Who keeps the till. (33-37)

Unlike Shelley, however, there is an intensely embittered quality that manifests in a staccato diction, as well as an emphasis on decrepitude in the quintuple “old”. With Shelley there was the pathos of betrayal subsiding into silence. With Yeats we have rather the need to stave off the silence with the vicious phonetics of stark monosyllables. And yet the poem is tender insofar as it is cruel to no one and nothing so much as its own author. As with “Long-Legged Fly” there is a return to the consideration of the point at which everything begins and the suggestion is that the nature and architecture of our beginning may be synonymous with our end; silence to sound, and back to silence.

Now that my ladder’s gone

I must lie down where all ladders start

In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart. (38-40)

There is a sense of lying among the ruined fragments of a life that is disintegrating, rather than being suspended and sustained by all that he has been the architect of. As with “Cuchulain Comforted” we recognize a profound bitterness but the image of the “rag and bone shop” also reminds us of what has been accrued throughout the journey. Whether “foul” or otherwise, the nature of the silence at which Yeats finds himself arriving is different from the silence out of which he came since, between the two, poetic language has come to stain “the white radiance of eternity.” (463).

It is in the dual meaning of the title, however, that we see perhaps the most revealing aspect of the poem and it is a revelation that fittingly recalls us to Shelley. On the one hand it denotes a sense of being abandoned by the artistic flourish, and the fear that one might no longer be yoked to a great artistic momentum. The simultaneously majestic and diminutive image of circus animals - exotic and enticing, yet confined and dominated - captures the grandeur of genius and destiny but also the comparative littleness of possessing a sense of anxiety about such things. The second understanding of the title concerns Yeats's relationship with the idea of an omnipresent poetic vision and is understood by Bloom in the following terms:

Yeats chooses the heart again, but without affection or respect for it. To be satisfied with one's heart as a poetic theme is to acknowledge what it pained Yeats to recognize, that his concern was not with the content of the poetic vision, as Blake's was, but with his relation as a poet to his own vision, as Wordsworth's was, and Shelley's and Keats's also. There are very few poets in English whose subject is the content of poetic vision, but Blake is certainly among them.

Browning and Stevens are poets who developed from one concern to the other, and ended with the content of the poetic vision as their subject. This is hardly a question of greater or lesser fortune among poets; to choose between the two kinds is a choice of greatnesses, as in a reader's ultimate preference between Blake and Wordsworth. But it is a misfortune for a poet to mistake his natural kind. In *The*

*Circus Animals' Desertion*, Yeats discovers his kind with considerable bitterness, but with a bitterness that possesses aesthetic dignity.”<sup>169</sup>

The title carries with it the profound sense of abandonment that is the result of this belated recognition. It is only when Yeats felt his language to be evading him, perhaps finally and forever, that he was able to comprehend that his understanding of its purpose had been inexact. This anxiety is then compounded by a sense of bereavement for the self that he was not, but which he would have preferred to be, the “dream itself” (24). In his 1900 essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry”, Yeats wrote, in what at that much earlier time must have felt like an account that could bear no similarity to his own impulses or eventual fate:

Shelley, who hated life because he sought ‘more in life than any understood,’ would have wandered, lost in a ceaseless reverie, in some chapel of the Star of infinite desire.

I think too that as he knelt before an altar where a thin flame burnt in a lamp made of green agate, a single vision would have come to him again and again, a vision of a boat drifting down a broad river between high hills where there were caves and towers, and following the light of one Star; and that voices would have told him how there is for every man some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life, for wisdom first speaks in

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<sup>169</sup>Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p. 457.

images, and this one image, if he would but brood over it his life long, would lead his soul, disentangled from unmeaning circumstance and the ebb and flow of the world, into that far household where the undying gods await all whose souls have become simple as flame, whose bodies have become quiet as an agate lamp.<sup>170</sup>

The scene of Yeats's imagining conjures forth the objective and aesthetics of *Alastor*, but an *Alastor* that arrives at the point of fruition. What Yeats envisages for Shelley is the condition to which all his language seemed to propel him. What Yeats sees for himself in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" is the belated recognition that the point to which his own language has been carrying him may be other than what he envisaged. He does not know how to enter into the silence about which he already retained an essential anxiety, because even the language he lived by seems to have, in some fashion, abandoned him, "Now that my ladder's gone". His soul, rather than feeling "simple as a flame" and become more unfamiliar, and so his impulse is simply to "lie down", among all the misunderstood language and memory he has accrued, and whatever order that may be thought to amount to. It is a submission not unlike the one in "Cuchulain Comforted". We might say that the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart" is where Yeats himself silently sews his shroud.

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<sup>170</sup>W. B. Yeats. *Essays And Introductions*. New York: Macmillan, 1961. pp.94-95



## Chapter 6

### **The Fruitful Void: silence and the fertile nature of the contradictory in Yeats.**

I began the preceding chapter with the suggestion that the poetry of Yeats cannot be said to wholly, or organically, fall within the parameters of any single literary movement, in spite of his acute consciousness of preceding poets and poetry. The manifestations and depictions of silence throughout the poems so far addressed have seemed to largely sustain this notion, insofar as they incorporate a profound awareness of much of what we encountered in Shelley and Browning while simultaneously offering something distinct. The search for the essence and genesis of the creative force that Shelley rendered almost as a diminutive epic with *Alastor* becomes, with Yeats, even more compact, as we saw in “Long-Legged Fly”. The afterlife in “Cuchulain Comforted” is depicted not as compensatory for death, as we saw *Adonais*, but as a means of eradicating the qualities that rendered the deceased individual exceptional in life, a circumstance that seems to attest to a deeply personal fear on the part of the poet. A momentary reminiscence on a thwarted, near life-long passion in “A Circus Animals’ Desertion” offers no self-recrimination for inaction but rather a muted recognition that the dream pursued was itself inauthentic.<sup>171</sup> However, at this point it should be observed that one of

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<sup>171</sup> This recalls us to the, “And both perceived they had dreamed a dream;” (153) of Browning’s “The Statue and the Bust”.

the reasons Yeats so successfully evades classification with either his contemporaries or predecessors is that he went to some trouble to fashion a poetic philosophy of his own that neither harmonized with, nor expanded upon, a pre-existing poetic movement. John Unterecker describes Yeats's motivation for the establishing of a personal poetic theory in the following terms:

Though Yeats was of course right in believing that his genius lay in "personal utterance" he recognized that personal utterance alone could not organize a body of lyric poetry and drama into the organic structure he hoped to build. For one thing, personal utterance, as he had discovered in his earliest experiments in verse, is beset always by the danger of sentimentality which leads poetry away from the reality that poetry would deal with to various kinds of self-pity and self-deception.

His problem, therefore, was to discover a technique by which the personal could somehow be objectified, be given the appearance of impersonal "truth" and yet retain the emotive force of a privately held belief. A partial solution was the theory of the Mask which, perhaps compounded from popular psychology on one hand and occult material on the other, was used by Yeats to make public his secret selves.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader's Guide To William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996. pp. 15-16.

This doctrine of the Mask explored the relationship between self and reality, and the idea that humanity (though Yeats concerned himself primarily with the mentality of the writer), was roughly divided into two contrasting categories, extroverts and introverts. Into the latter category fell those capable of artistic creativity in various fields and mediums (music, art, literature etc.). The objective was then to uncover the nature of one's anti-self, or "ideal opposite", not in order to adopt it as an alternative to the organic and instinctive self, but so as to harness the creative force of the interaction of apparent opposites, "find ultimate reality not in any one of them but in their interaction."<sup>173</sup> The co-existence of the mutually contradictory is, as we have already seen, an ineluctable dimension of the relationship between silence and sound throughout poetry and, in Yeats's doctrine of the Mask, we discover something approaching a symmetrical and synthesizing poetic theory. Unterecker in his concise, if faintly simplistic, summary goes on to affirm that:

The doctrine of the Mask erects, therefore, on the artist's personality a kind of private mythology in which the individual struggles to become that which is most unlike himself: the introvert artist puts on an extrovert Mask; the subjective man assumes the Mask of the man of action. And because mythology and history, reducing men to types, mere images, simpler figures than flesh and blood men,

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<sup>173</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader's Guide To William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996.p. 16.

does offer us patterns, we can, if we will, choose our Mask from those stored up by the past. A modern introvert's mask – say Yeats's – might in many ways resemble one of the great stone faces of myth – say Cuchulain's face, a hero striding out of the remote legendary Irish past, a man of action, great fighter and great lover.<sup>174</sup>

We have considered the extent to which Yeats's depiction of the posthumous fate of Cuchulain radiated an acutely personal dimension: the fear that not only the fact of death but also the nature of the afterlife should serve as the great equalizer of men. Yeats's implication seems to be that the gap between the hero and the common man is mirrored in modernity by the gap between the artist and the ordinary individual. I say 'artist' but it might be more accurate to specify 'Poet' as, indeed, did Shelley in *Alastor*. In Yeats's self-mythology the poets seem to have become, if not synonymous with the heroes of mythology, then certainly a modern version thereof. Here we must remember that Yeats was, whether always with specific intent or otherwise, a revolutionary poet. Indeed, his internal upheaval upon discovering that many of the young men who were executed after the 1916 uprising might have been inspired into the action that resulted in their deaths by his play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (which concerned a female personification of

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<sup>174</sup> We may note that the authoritative verb 'to stride' is with Yeats in *Cuchulain Comforted*. (John Unterecker. *A Reader's Guide To William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996. pp.16-17).

Ireland inciting her bridegroom to rebellion) resulted in his stark and achingly self-reflective poem “Man and the Echo” (1939).<sup>175</sup>

MAN

In a cleft that's christened Alt  
Under broken stone I halt  
At the bottom of a pit  
That broad noon has never lit,  
And shout a secret to the stone.  
All that I have said and done,  
Now that I am old and ill,  
Turns into a question till  
I lie awake night after night  
And never get the answers right,  
Did that play of mine send out  
Certain men the English shot?  
Did words of mine put too great a strain  
On that woman's reeling brain?  
Could my spoken words have checked  
That whereby a house lay wrecked?  
And all seems evil until I

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<sup>175</sup>W.B. Yeats. *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, And Prose*. Ed. James Pethica. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000. p.127, note 2.

Sleepless would lie down and die. (1-18)

Here we see the elderly Yeats speculating about the real-terms cost of his language and how many individuals may have paid a profound and unintended price. Again we feel silence resonating in the wake of the repeated unanswered, and unanswerable, questions. The contrast between the impotence of Yeats's irresolvable doubt, that has come to supplant a language so certain and powerful that it once moved men to bargain their existences seems, against the immovable, rocky setting, almost tantamount to a premonition of molecular breakdown. The poem's terse, abrupt metre and staccato rhyming couplets also suggest a contraction of the lyrical prose that the poet suspects helped to trigger so much unlooked for destruction. It is as if the unintended consequences of Yeats's language generated in the poet an impulse to discipline and compact it so that nothing said might range beyond specific intention. It is also important to note the jaggedly indifferent condition of the poet's surroundings and the contrast this presents with the majestically substantive and interactive quality of the relationship between the speaker and the natural world in *Mont Blanc* - The "ECHO" in the second stanza only reiterates the final four words of the first, "Lie down and die." (18). It could be argued that this in itself is a form of participation, that the words stand as both a judgment and an answer to the poet's self-deconstruction, and yet the starkly inanimate aesthetic of the darkened, stony space seems incongruous with any kind of fellowship between man and the natural

world.<sup>176</sup> This is language dispersed into the indifference of nature and the echo does no more than what nature dictates that it must; it merely enforces the nihilistic impulse of the ageing poet with the callous indifference of contrasting permanence. Yeats, however, treats the echo as an answer to, or perhaps a further inducement to react against, his own capsizing vitality. His decision to do so reminds us how often mankind has located the personal and deliberate in the impersonal and unintended. It may be that this longing to find reason in the reasonless, the stamp of our own identity upon the relentlessly impersonal, is born out of the same motivation that compels us to fill organic silence up to the brim with our own alien language. There is a kind of dignified persistence, albeit vaguely Sisyphean in essence, to Yeats's determination even at the last to continue to introduce the intellect into the indifference of nature and the futility of human tragedy. Helen Vendler in her essay, "The Later Poetry" suggests that this distinguishes "Man and the Echo" from such posthumous-themed later poems as "Cuchulain Comforted", because it remains "largely within the bounds of human striving".<sup>177</sup> And yet it is a verbal striving that, almost contradictorily, seems to be longing for a reticence for which it is too late. The "evil" lies in the fact, unalterable as the rocky landscape, that the houses cannot be un-wrecked, the men

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<sup>176</sup> It is also hard not to recall the mythological Echo, whose fate is emblematic of the deleterious effect that a combination of indifference and obsession can have upon identity. (Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. Rolfe Humphries. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955.Bk III:339-358).

<sup>177</sup> Helen Vendler. "The Later Poetry". *The Cambridge Companion To W.B. Yeats*. Ed. Marjorie Elizabeth Howes, and John Kelly. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.p. 98.

un-shot or Margot Ruddock's brain healed.<sup>178</sup> Essentially, "Man and the Echo" is a poem of remorse, which is to say a longing to un-live and undo past actions. I distinguish between "regret" and "remorse" insofar as the former seems to denote sorrow for the undone, while the latter is sorrow for what has been done.

MAN

That were to shirk  
The spiritual intellect's great work  
And shirk it in vain. There is no release  
In bodkin or disease,  
Nor can there be a work so great  
As that which cleans man's dirty slate. (19-24)

Here Yeats is implicitly acknowledging that what has been said cannot be unsaid and that the events which language helps to engender are, to some degree, a responsibility that must also be shouldered. Thus we find ourselves confronted with the idea that the poetic voice can itself be a thing of action and that, as we have seen before, silence may therefore be synonymous with inaction. Unlike what we encountered in Browning, however, here there may be instances where inaction proves more circumspect and judicious. Ultimately, Yeats appears to be questioning the essential rightness of having disseminated language capable of

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<sup>178</sup> A woman with whom Yeats had an affair and who subsequently became mentally unstable. (W. B. Yeats, Margot Ruddock, and Roger Joseph McHugh. *Ah, Sweet Dancer*. New York: Macmillan, 1971).



exacting a human and physical cost and searching, with conscious hopelessness, for absolution.

“Man and the Echo” was written in 1939 and is saturated in the premonitions of mortality but an aspect of the concept and state of mind it addresses is already very much with Yeats some years earlier, as is shown in his 1933 poem “The Choice”.<sup>179</sup>

The intellect of man is forced to choose  
Perfection of the life, or of the work,  
And if it take the second must refuse  
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.  
When all the story's finished, what's the news?  
In luck or out the toil has left its mark:  
That old perplexity an empty purse,  
Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse. (1-8)

That Yeats, having chosen the pathway of perfection of the “work”, seems no more inclined to acquit himself of imperfections of the “life”, suggests an inability to ever wholly separate the one from the other. It is an inability that is exhibited in “Man and the Echo” through the simultaneous rejection of the physical and a preoccupation with, and seeking out of, an elemental landscape. It may be fair to say that, deliberately or otherwise, Yeats demonstrates the impossibility of a tidy

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<sup>179</sup>W.B. Yeats. *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, And Prose*. Ed. James Pethica. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

separation between the self and the Mask. Language, as we have seen, may affect the physical world just as the physical world may ultimately fail to sustain language. The question of the creative force of interacting opposites with Yeats thus becomes something that redefines our understanding of the nature of opposites, since self and Mask do not merely aid in the definition of each other through contrast, they necessarily bleed into one another. Richard Ellmann suggests that “many of [Yeats’s] latter poems assert more peremptorily than before the virtual identity between images produced by the imagination and actual people and events”<sup>180</sup>, alluding to “Man and the Echo” as an example. It is an identification that Yeats seems, contradictorily, both to seek out and evade, since it can lend to thought and language a richness that sometimes exacts an unforeseen price in the currency of reality.

We have previously considered the extent to which Yeats’s particular self-mythology may have stretched to the perception of himself as a kind of modern, literary Cuchulain, and certainly this synthesizes with his doctrine of the Mask. However, in “Man and the Echo” Yeats appears to derive no pleasure from the idea that his language might have generated either an active response or a physical deficit. Rather he seems to wish to shed the Mask and the personal mythology out of which it was fashioned and retreat into a purely intellectual arena where the physical is regarded with suspicion, if not active contempt:

While man can still his body keep

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<sup>180</sup>Richard Ellmann. *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1999. p. 284.

Wine or love drug him to sleep  
Waking he thanks the Lord that he  
Has body its stupidity,  
But body gone he sleeps no more  
And till his intellect grows sure  
That all's arranged in one clear view  
Pursues the thoughts that I pursue,  
Then stands in judgment on his soul,  
And, all work done, dismisses all  
Out of intellect and sight  
And sinks at last into the night. (25-36)

Instead of an impulse to recapture physicality Yeats champions an introverted and ordered reflection for the period preceding death and its final, impermeable silence. The ascendancy of the internal is re-established while the body, the salient aspect of extroverts such as Cuchulain, is not only dismissed but even judged an impediment to such authentic reflection. In a fashion reminiscent of “Cuchulain Comforted”, Yeats seems to be voluntarily constructing a metaphorical “shroud” as a reaction against the recollection of the unintended deaths for which he feels culpable. Thus the poem’s title is imbued with a larger significance than the simple reiteration of a central conceit; emphasis has not only been restored to language now devoid of a physical extension but the echo also seems to be what Yeats is left with once his Mask has fallen away. That said, the final stanza

recollects that, unlike Cuchulain, Yeats has not yet slipped “Into the night” as his echo seems to passively and resignedly prophesy. Instead, his reverie and pursuit of internal order are disrupted by the sharp cry of an animal in pain, an emblem perhaps of the helpless agony he fears his words may once have helped to engender. As Vendler also observes, “the work of the intellect is ever interrupted by the sound of suffering”.<sup>181</sup> For Yeats I suggest it is more personal than that; the work of the intellect can be the thing that generates the “sound of suffering”, and suffering will always return in one guise or another to recall us to the particular instances from which we most long to be liberated.

MAN

O rocky voice

Shall we in that great night rejoice?

What do we know but that we face

One another in this place?

But hush, for I have lost the theme

Its joy or night seem but a dream;

Up there some hawk or owl has struck

Dropping out of sky or rock,

A stricken rabbit is crying out

And its cry distracts my thought. (37-46)

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<sup>181</sup>Helen Vendler. “The Later Poetry”. *The Cambridge Companion To W.B. Yeats*. Ed. Marjorie Elizabeth Howes, and John Kelly. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.p. 98.

As an ending to a poem filled with pathos, but devoid of histrionics, it seems a curiously trivial one and yet the point appears to be that the simultaneously inconsequential and arresting nature of the physical is always capable of eclipsing the internal, regardless of our efforts to divorce ourselves from it. There is an inflection of irony in the fact that this implication should serve to conclude a stanza that is both a reverie and a further unanswered question about the aftermath of mortality, “Shall we in that great night rejoice?”. The appeal to the “rocky voice” also recalls us to Shelley’s *Mont Blanc*, reminding us of the earlier poet’s affirmation that the natural world, “hast a voice... to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe” (80-81). Here we see Yeats appealing to the rock for just such a revelation and being met only with silence. It may be that, in light of the impetus for the poem, Yeats felt there could be no more judicious conclusion to it than the image of a voice unused and a question unanswered. It may also be that the form of the poem and the clear segregation of the ‘Echo’ and the ‘Man’ is intended to be emblematic of the separation between language and the intention behind it. A man may control what it is that he says but he cannot control the ripples and mutations of interpretation, the echo, as it were. The gap between thought and expression, and the further space between expression and interpretation, is such that both man and motive may lie many leagues apart from their own echo. The distance that always must, and always will, remain may not precisely be silence, but it is an emptiness for which we have no translation.

The notion of Yeats as a revolutionary poet, and the extent to which language can be viewed as synonymous with action in such literal terms, recalls me briefly to Shelley's derisive, faux-elegiac sonnet *To Wordsworth*. Here Shelley deplores the "Poet of Nature('s)" (1) abandoning of his anti-establishment political convictions for an increasingly comfortable conservatism. Wordsworth's own retreat from the politically controversial was not generated so much by a fear that his writing might have served to generate widespread rebellion and validate human sacrifice, so much as a fundamental distaste for what he observed of the French revolution. As with Yeats, however, there was a sense of the disunity between a concept and its execution (the choice of word may almost function in a literal sense for the purpose of this context). What Wordsworth speaks of is exactly what Yeats fears to fully know, the relationship between the content of an idea (in both instances the concept of freedom) and the human cost of attaining it. This unpopulated space between thought, the language of thought and the practical means of implementing it, is articulated by Wordsworth in Book X of *The Prelude*:

I cross'd (a blank and empty area then)  
The Square of the Carousel, few weeks back  
Heap'd up with dead and dying, upon these  
And other sights looking as doth a man  
Upon a volume whose contents he knows  
Are memorable, but from him lock'd up,

Being written in a tongue he cannot read,  
So that he questions the mute leaves with pain  
And half upbraids their silence. (55-63)<sup>182</sup>

I take this to be a symbolic description of the pilgrimage between concept and enactment. Wordsworth employs the geographical space of revolutionary Paris to show the annihilating effects that can be the inadvertent result of an impractical idealism or, perhaps more exactly, idealism in the hands of those who only slenderly comprehend it. In the melting pot of such minds the most beautiful and purely intended language may be infused with vengefulness and excess until its components have been rearranged into their own antithesis, which must necessarily be another version of what the original language was intended to eradicate. Essentially, what Wordsworth seems to be bemoaning is the impossibility of an authentic translation of thought to action, and our impulse to rail against the empty space, or “silence”, that comprises this separation.

Wordsworth’s sleepless horror at the excesses of the French Revolution remains, however, less personal than Yeats’s fear that his own language might have made a practical, physical difference to the fabric of history. It is enough to engender a moment’s pause that a poet such as Wordsworth, who was so often inclined to see the self-oriented side of a question, here understands the problem to be one for humanity at large, “I seem’d to hear a voice that cried, / To the whole City, ‘Sleep

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<sup>182</sup>William Wordsworth. *The Prelude*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970.

no more.’” (36-37). The allusion to the “whole City”, however, might be said to be counterbalance by a spasm of solipsism in the obvious Macbeth reference.<sup>183</sup>

Shelley ultimately saw Wordsworth’s shift in ideology as tantamount to an annihilation of the self, “Deserting these, though leavest me to grieve, / Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.” (13-14), not a recognition of the annihilating capacity of articulation. That Yeats never intended “that play of [his]” to be a virtual battle cry is perhaps too bold a statement, but what does seem to be revealed in “Man and the Echo” is the instinctive horror the poet felt, even when the cause in question met with his approval, for human loss. We might note some irony in the fact that Yeats’s fear was for the opposite of what W.H Auden affirmed in the elegy he wrote for the great Irish poet: that in this instance poetry might truly have made something happen.<sup>184</sup>

It is too much to affirm that the unease of which Yeats eventually spoke in “Man and the Echo”, but which must presumably have been with him in some nebulous form since the 1916 uprising, led to a shift away from poetry or prose that could be interpreted as having a practical and political application, but what is certain is that Yeats’s interest in literary explorations of the occult increased around this time. Vendler observes that, “Yeats and his wife were ardently

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<sup>183</sup> “Methought I heard a voice cry, “Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep-” (Act II, Scene ii). Wordsworth is not precisely equating himself with the character of Macbeth, but he does seem to be using the emphasis on agency in the line (“Macbeth doth murder sleep”) to entrench a suggestion of some obscure feeling of responsibility for the events that are unfolding around him.

<sup>184</sup> “For poetry makes nothing happen” (39) *In Memory Of W.B. Yeats*. (W.H. Auden. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. New York: Random House, 1976.).



pursuing the practice of automatic writing, which had led, in 1918, to the first sketch – called *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* – of the occult materials that would receive their fullest form in the 1926 publication of *A Vision*.<sup>185</sup> *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* and the poem “Ego Dominus Tuus”, which prefaces the book and is essentially a poetic duologue about the doctrine of the Mask, both represent a fascinating foray into the question of coexisting contradictions. In part V of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* Yeats writes:

“We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. Unlike the rhetoricians, who get a confident voice from remembering the crowd they have won or may win, we sing amid our uncertainty; and, smitten even in the presence of the most high beauty by the knowledge of our solitude, our rhythm shudders.”<sup>186</sup>

The image of the shuddering rhythm anticipates the strangely constricted and unrelenting cadences of “Man and the Echo”, rhythms that seem tailored to the need to prevent beauty, whether natural or internal, from further unfastening the poet’s selfhood. The idea of being “smitten even in the presence of the most high beauty by the knowledge of our solitude” is equally arresting when considered in

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<sup>185</sup>Helen Vendler. “The Later Poetry”. *The Cambridge Companion To W.B. Yeats*. Ed. Marjorie Elizabeth Howes, and John Kelly. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.p. 77.

<sup>186</sup>W. B. Yeats. *Yeats’s Poetry, Drama, And Prose*. Ed. James Pethica. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.p. 285.

the context of perhaps the most unforgettable paragraph of this section of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*:

“Neither must we create, by hiding ugliness, a false beauty as our offering to the world. He only can endure the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs, for only when we have seen and foreseen what we dread shall we be rewarded by that dazzling, unforeseen, wing-footed wanderer. We could not find him if he were not in some sense of our own being, and yet of our own being but as water with fire, a noise with silence. He is of all things not impossible the most difficult, for that which comes easily can never be a portion of our being; ‘soon got, soon gone,’ as the proverb says. I shall feel the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful when I understand I have nothing, that the ringers in the tower have appointed for the hymen of the soul a passing bell.”<sup>187</sup>

There is, both here and in the earlier reference to the intrusion of our sense of essential solitude upon our experience of beauty, a strong implication that what we might previously have perceived as emptiness may be a paradoxically populated space. The reference to “solitude” summons echoes of *Mont Blanc* but Yeats’s allusions to coexisting opposites in this extract are more extensive (if not necessarily more expansive) and seem concentrated on a specific theoretical objective. What Yeats appears to be suggesting is not only, as we have seen

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<sup>187</sup>W. B. Yeats. *Mythologies*. New York: Macmillan, 1959. p. 332.

before, that in the paradox of the coexistence of opposites lies the essence of creative fertility, but also that to perceive opposites as mutually annihilating may be a fallacy. In order to comprehend or experience any absolute one must be equally acquainted with its antithesis and thus the coexistence of opposites becomes not only possible but fundamental, since intrinsic to the understanding of anything is a comprehension of its contradictory counterpart. It is only through the internalizing of our own Mask that we may have the “noise in silence” and attain that superlative richness of understanding that renders even the “void fruitful”. This paradox of paradox itself is made complete through the choice of the possessive verb “to have” as it is applied to the idea of nothingness at the conclusion of the paragraph. It endows the “nothing” of which Yeats speaks with a perversely substantive and almost corporeal quality, enjoining us to recognize that if one has “nothing” then at least one may be said to have precisely that.

With this in mind, let us consider the poem that precedes the text of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. The title itself requires some contextualization, since “Ego Dominus Tuus” refers to a dream had by Dante Alighieri in which a “lord of terrible aspect” spoke those words to him, the translation of which is, “I am your master.”<sup>188</sup> Adding to the tapestry of associations, the portion of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* with which we are concerned, and which the poem immediately

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<sup>188</sup>W. B. Yeats. *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, And Prose*. Ed. James Pethica. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.p. 66, note 1.

precedes, is *Anima Hominis*, (“The Soul of Man”).<sup>189</sup> This quotation is taken from Book II of Virgil’s *The Aeneid* when Aeneas is describing the sacking of Troy:

“And now from Tenedos the Argive army  
were moving in their marshalled ships, beneath  
the friendly silence[s] of the tranquil moon,  
seeking familiar shores.” (349-354)<sup>190</sup>

The allusion to the notorious Grecian victory that returned Helen to her home and husband, as described by a Trojan hero, seems to lodge in the mind the need to retain a position on both sides of a question or an image. Aeneas may be a hero of the losing side but there is still heroism to be found there, and thus a certain similarity with the faction to which he was opposed. Greek and Trojan are, for the purposes of the history and poetry concerning them, almost exclusively understood within the context of each other. The “friendly silence of the tranquil” moon also summons up a sense of an ineradicable, though certainly not sinister, silence and calm against the backdrop of which all human sound and activity rages. We might see this, as I suspect Yeats did, as the underlying purity of the immortal, spiritual sphere into which poetry and séance may make their partial pilgrimages.

With this in mind let us consider the poem itself, which is divided into stanzas of varying lengths, alternately titled “HIC” (The One), and “ILLE” (The

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<sup>189</sup>W. B. Yeats. *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, And Prose*. Ed. James Pethica. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.p. 285.

<sup>190</sup>Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. London: University of California Presss,1982.

Other).<sup>191</sup> The poem seems to constitute a conversation between the poet's introverted self and his extroverted Mask in a fashion not wholly dissimilar to what we saw in "Man and the Echo". However, "Man and the Echo" was among Yeats's last poems, written some twenty years later than "Ego Dominus Tuus" (1919), in 1939. There, as we saw, the Echo appeared to represent the winding down of the poet's extroverted or physical self and the simultaneous longing for, and reaction against, annihilation on the part of his consciousness. In contrast, "Ego Dominus Tuus" seems to depict a more dominant Mask or 'other', to use the language of the poem, and an almost supplicatory introvert. The balance of give and take should not, however, be understood as Yeats leaning with any certainty towards one or another aspect of selfhood. As George Bornstein once said of Yeats, "not only Romanticism but even one's own Romanticism would change over time."<sup>192</sup> The same might be said of Yeats's attitude to the dimensions of his own consciousness as understood through the doctrine of the Mask; there is a shifting, seasonal quality that can be traced through his poetry, against the backdrop of the passage of time. It is an unending conversation, portions of which we are privileged to overhear.

Michael O'Neill understands what we might call the interactive dichotomy of "Ego Dominus Tuus" in the context of Yeats's complex relationship with the role of the spirit and imagination in man in the creation of poetry:

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<sup>191</sup> W. B. Yeats. *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, And Prose*. Ed. James Pethica. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000. p. 66.

<sup>192</sup> George Bornstein, "Yeats and Romanticism", in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats*, ed. Majorie Howes and John Kelly. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. p. 21.

Yeats's mid-career and later poems vex intriguingly his own exalted transhistorical account of the romantic as 'freedom of the spirit and imagination of man in literature. In 'Ego Dominus Tuus' Yeats distinguishes between, yet links, Dante and English Romantic poetry as he articulates the notion that 'art / Is but a vision of reality'; 'vision' bespeaks the student of Shelley and Blake, even as 'reality' swithers between a quasi-occultist sense of the real and a glance at a would-be unillusioned Modernism.'"<sup>193</sup>

This notion seems to feed into the idea of the extent to which a striving between self and anti-self is a fluid one, insofar as both possess dimensions of the other. The vacillation of which O'Neill speaks also seems to have a portion of its roots in the Yeatsian anxiety regarding poetic movement classification that was discussed in the previous chapter. As we shall see in "Ego Dominus Tuus", Yeats, or the ILLE of Yeats, describes both Dante and Keats in terms of the visual impression of their internal condition that is conjured for him through their writing. The details of this shall be considered imminently, but I would suggest here that this strange half-identification between two distinct poets seems to be the product of Yeats's intense focus on the individual rather than the movement or epoch to which they are seen to belong. One might say that Yeats combats, whether deliberately or otherwise, the concept of encasing a poet in a movement or

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<sup>193</sup>Michael O'Neill. *The All-Sustaining Air*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. p. 35.

collective poetic consciousness by treating such things as transparent, an empty obstruction through which the poet may be glimpsed and seen to be complete in his own right. For Yeats, the ever more pressing concern is with the fabric of the self, the warring factions of the mind and spirit that give rise to poetry. Like the participants of the Trojan War, the factions of the soul are forever destined to be seen in the context of each other but, unlike that ancient conflict, there can be no permanent victor. The purpose is the interaction, for this interaction is the means of making poetry.

The opening stanza serves to conjure the aforementioned image of the quietly returning Grecian ships of the *Aeneid*:

*Hic*

you walk in the moon

And though you have passed the best of life still trace

Enthralled by the unconquerable delusion

Magical shapes. (4-7)

The seemingly deliberate allusion to moonlight recalls us to the content of Aeneas's monologue and the notion of "seeking familiar shores". Certainly the "walk in the moon" is merely symbolic of, or referential to, those "familiar shores", but both are evocative of Yeats's allusion to the elusive "wing-footed wanderer" whom "we could not find if he were not of our own being, and yet of our own being but as water with fire, a noise with silence." Just as the Greeks return searching for an enemy that is of striking similarity in custom and objective

to themselves, so too does the HIC of the poem seek out the ILLE; the self its Mask. The suggestion seems to be that a search is required not so much to locate something that is absent as to uncover something that is already profoundly present and fundamental. It should be remembered that whatever the apparent distinctions between HIC and ILLE, the poem is written in continuous blank verse that is arranged as dialogue, but that could also function as a single, self-questioning monologue were these attributing headlines removed.

In the second stanza the ILLE responds:

By the help of an image

I call to my own opposite, summon all

That I have handled least, least looked up. (7-10)

Here the intention to locate one's opposite is entirely explicit and the choice of diction is more corporeal and physical. An "image" certainly seems a less ethereal alternative to the "magical shapes" of the first, and the word "handled" is unambiguously tangible. The response of HIC, in contrast, "And I would find myself and not an image" (10) is notable both because of its continued focus on the internal and because of its comparative brevity. After the opening stanza, "the one" becomes increasingly laconic while "the other" becomes more verbose and expansive. This, after all, is the poem of a much younger man than the author of "Man and the Echo" where the more extroverted and physical side appears to take centre stage, summoning out, or eclipsing, the introverted side by turns. As



always, however, the purpose is the discussion, the fact of selfhood seeking the aspect of itself that it most instinctively tries to obscure.

‘The other’ replies:

That is our modern hope and by its light  
We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind  
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;  
Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush  
We are but critics, or but half create  
Timid, entangled, empty and abashed  
Lacking the countenance of our friends. (11-17)

The use of the word “modern” is fundamental here since through it Yeats implies that this theory of the creative force of the interaction between the self and the anti-self is a thing born out of, or derived from, many generations of artistic endeavour. Indeed, the deployment of Virgilian and Dantescan references in two of the relevant titles now appears highly deliberate, intended to establish Yeats’s theory within the arc of inter-generational artistic excellence and, perhaps, as the climax thereof. Dante, of course, was taken through the nine circles of Hell and through a good deal of Purgatory by Virgil himself and, as such, this emphasis on a kind of spiritual pedagogy seems salient.<sup>194</sup> By the “light” of this “hope” Yeats suggests it has become possible to evolve past mere unrefined creative instinct,

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<sup>194</sup>Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy Of Dante Alighieri*. Trans. Robert M Durling, and Ronald L Martinez New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

“the old nonchalance of the hand”, and arrive at a condition of pure creativity through the synthesis of the apparently mutually cancelling. Certainly Yeats is not suggesting that what Virgil, Dante and finally Keats offered was not tantamount to art – and great art at that – but what he does seem to be considering is the possible discovery of a new and developmental method whereby art may be progressed and purified, upon the back of what preceded it, by replacing the haphazard with an internalized system of creativity.

The subsequent section goes on specifically to allude to Dante’s condition of self-knowledge, which to ‘the one’ seems both recognizable and complete, a notion that is swiftly countered by ‘the other’.

HIC

And yet

The chief imagination of Christendom  
Dante Alighieri so utterly found himself  
That he has made that hollow face of his  
More plain to the mind’s eye than any face  
But that of Christ.

ILLE

And did he find himself  
Or was the hunger that had made it hollow  
A hunger for the apple on the bough

Most out of reach? and is that spectral image  
The man that Lapo and that Guido knew?  
I think he fashioned from his opposite  
An image that might have been a stony face,  
Staring upon a bedouin's horse-hair roof  
From doored and windowed cliff, or half upturned  
Among the coarse grass and the camel dung.  
He set his chisel to the hardest stone.  
Being mocked by Guido for his lecherous life  
Derided and deriding, driven out  
To climb the stair and eat that bitter bread,  
He found the unpersuadable justice  
He found the most exalted lady loved by man. (18-37)

Here 'the other' seems to ponder the extent to which Dante located his authentic Mask, or whether he drew his inspiration from the more quintessential facts of personal misery, the abuse of fellow Florentines and his ultimate exile. Instead of emphasizing the clarity of his "hollow face" as does "the one", "the other" focuses on the essential emptiness and unquenched appetite that it denotes. The allusion to the "apple on the bough" can be seen as reminiscent of the Genesis apple of knowledge or, in this case, self-knowledge. However, he also suggests that the persona that the poet presented to the world for derision was in fact "fashioned from his opposite" and may in reality have been what enabled Dante to become

the poet that he was. Again we have the strong impression that Yeats feels that physical and social concerns are important only insofar as they contribute to the creative process. There is an emphasis on the need for suffering and loneliness but more interestingly a strange suggestion that, having chosen this path, the artist in some fashion deserves the tangible suffering that comes with it, as well as the less tangible rewards. It is similar to the thought touched on in “The Choice” and even “Cuchulain Comforted”, that there is a price that should be paid for the pursuance of the most high and difficult objectives; not only that greatness will inevitably be perplexingly punished but even that it should be.

When ‘the one’ goes on to suggest that there may be artists who have, “made their art / Out of no tragic war, lovers of life, / Impulsive men that look for happiness / And sing when they have found it” (38-41), ‘the other’ reacts against the choice of the verb “to sing”, perhaps as being too organically pure and peculiarly lacking in worldliness for the variety of individual that “the one” is describing.

#### ILLE

No not sing,

For those that love the world serve it in action,

Grow rich, popular and full of influence,

And should they paint or write still it is action:

The struggle of the fly in the marmalade.

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,

The sentimentalist himself; while art  
Is but a vision of reality.  
What portion in the world can the artist have  
Who has awakened from the common dream  
But dissipation and despair? (42-51)

‘The other’ seems to dismiss as lacking in substance and authenticity the kind of “action” in which those “lovers of life” indulge. Even their art is no more than the sum of its physical execution, at best rhetoric and sentiment. As we know from the subsequent passages in *Per Amica*, Yeats does not consider “rhetoric” or “the quarrel with others” tantamount to poetry. Rather, poetry is the quarrel with the self, which is both espoused and exhibited in “Ego Dominus Tuus”. As for sentimentality he dismisses it in similar terms, also in *Per Amica*:

“Nor has any poet I have read of or heard of or met with been a sentimentalist. The other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self, as one may choose to name it, comes to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality.”<sup>195</sup>

The suggestion is that Yeats’s self and anti-self, “HIC” and “ILLE”, are precisely what lend him this “vision of reality” and exempts him from the limitations of the simple lover of existence, while also ensuring that he will be punished for it,

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<sup>195</sup>W. B. Yeats. *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, And Prose*. Ed. James Pethica. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.p. 331.

“What portion in the world can the artist have / Who has awakened from the common dream ‘ But dissipation and despair?” (49-51). Ultimately, it is this final question that is most arresting since it demonstrates the concern that the internalization of the Mask, and increased sinew of self-knowledge, will isolate the artist to a degree that is profoundly difficult in human terms. The supplicatory nature of the question seems almost to indicate a desire to retreat from what Yeats already feels to be the only way to authentically create. It is poignant to note that, in this moment of absolute vulnerability, in his dialogue between self and anti-self, the question remains unanswered, or answered only by an impersonal non sequitur:

HIC

And yet

No one denies to Keats love of the world;

Remember his deliberate happiness. (51-54)

There is a kind of essential silence to this moment of self-avoidance on the part of HIC that suggests a longing to divert the eyes from simultaneously unpalatable and desired. The question may not be met with silence, but the answer is silent upon what the question sought to elicit. The response of “the other” to this diversionary tactic is a revealing one:

His art is happy but who knows his mind?

I see a schoolboy when I think of him

With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,

For certainly he sank into his grave  
His senses and his heart unsatisfied,  
And made – being, poor, ailing and ignorant,  
Shut out from all the luxury of the world,  
The coarse-bred son of livery stable-keeper-  
Luxuriant song. (54-62)

There is a sense of empathetic regret for this failure fully to experience the physical sphere in the voice of ‘the other’ that seems to harmonize with its nature as the anti-self. It is also interesting to note the comma separating “being” from “poor” since it renders “being” itself an independent portion of what was made “Luxuriant song”, and not merely a qualification of Keats’s poverty. Ultimately the diverging impulses, and understanding of the required condition for poetic construction of the introverted self and the extraverted anti-self are set down in the final two stanzas:

HIC

Why should you leave the lamp  
Burning alone beside an open book.  
And trace these characters upon the sands?  
A style is found by sedentary toil  
And by the imitation of great masters.

ILLE

Because I seek an image not a book.

Those men that in their writings are most wise  
Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts.  
I call to the mysterious one who yet  
Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream  
And look most like me, being indeed my double,  
And prove of all imaginable things  
The most unlike, being my anti-self,  
And standing by these characters disclose  
All that I seek; and whisper it as though  
He were afraid the birds, who cry aloud  
Their momentary cries before it is dawn  
Would carry it away to blasphemous men. (62-79)

The philosophy of ‘the one’ seems to concern the craft of writing and the factual effort that is required to follow a thought to its substantive conclusion. The impulse of the introvert is to isolate himself from all company that cannot be found upon a page, a circumstance that ‘the other’, or extrovert, reacts against by affirming that, in order to locate one’s anti-self, and thus complete the internal interaction required for creativity, one must search beyond what has already been written. The “mysterious one who yet / Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream” prepares us for the notion of the “wing-footed wanderer” in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* and the synthesis of the concept of the “double” and the “anti-self” - the role that one’s antithesis plays in one’s identity - recalls us to the “noise in



silence”. Indeed, the poem appears to foreshadow that which Yeats ultimately affirms: that “he could not find him if he were not in some sense of my own being”. The notion that the anti-self exists already within the self is exemplified by the content and structure of the poem, which, after all, is a conversation between two divergent but intrinsic aspects of the poet that, as previously suggested, could serve (with minor alterations) as a self-questioning monologue. Certainly there is an on-going battle in the attempt to balance the one with the other but what Yeats seems to be demonstrating is that this is precisely what goes into the making of poetry, the “quarrel we have with ourselves”. Thus, “Ego Dominus Tuus” is essentially a poem of how poetry is made; the continuous struggle between the poet’s self and anti-self and the self-knowledge that such a struggle generates. It is a conversation that persists silently inside the consciousness of the poet; the perpetual effort of ‘the one’ to be the “master” of ‘the other’, and thus we see a possible understanding for the translation of the title. However, we have already addressed the impossibility of a permanent ascendancy of self or anti-self for the purposes of Yeats’s philosophy, which suggests that the potential mastery to which the title alludes concerns something closer to the poet’s own mastery of his creative force. Harold Bloom wrote that, “Mastery is the successful quest for the image, an image looking like oneself, but proving, of all imaginable things, to be the most unlike, or the anti-self.”<sup>196</sup> He goes on to affirm that:

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<sup>196</sup>Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p.197

“*Ego Dominus Tuus*, viewed standing up close, is understandably more in the pattern of *Alastor*; the poet seeks that mysterious one who will complete him, while being shadowed by the *daimon* of his Solitude. He finds, neither an emanative beloved, nor the mocking shadow of his quest, but rather a mastery that, in freeing him from natural limitation, renders him also unfit to continue natural existence. *Alastor* ends neither in bafflement nor in ordinary despair, yet its triumph is a splendid outrage of alienation, a dead end for the creative spirit. Yeats, as his lyric on the swans at Coole shows, was weary of such triumph, and *Per Amica* attempts another fresh start for the imagination. *Ego Dominus Tuus* is the kernel for *Per Amica*,”<sup>197</sup>

Looking at the poem then through a Bloomian telescope, it seems that the essential difference between *Alastor* and “*Ego Dominus Tuus*” is that the purpose of the former’s quest is to be found in its cessation, and the late-dawning realization of this fact upon the Poet of the poem brings with it a sense of betrayal sweetened by the perversely elevating knowledge of how profoundly personal it is. It is what we might term an *achieved* betrayal, more than an inflicted one, and it sets the Poet apart from the rest of the humankind. In “*Ego Dominus Tuus*” we find an the unglamorous realization cushioned by the poem’s lyricism; the fact that the purpose of this self-exploration is not to free oneself from life but to be forced to live it, and to live it, as it were, with a kind of metaphorical clubbed foot. Yeats

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<sup>197</sup>Harold Bloom. *Yeats*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. p.198.

seems to be aware that to annex the creative power of the interaction of self and anti-self seems to exact a deficit in life, for all that it offers a surplus in language. There will also be need to navigate the language and interpretation of the, “blasphemous men” (79), and there is a strong sense of inevitable social or circumstantial victimization throughout the poem in the allusions to Dante and Keats, as though a completion of the poetic soul requires a compromising of the human one. It is no accident that, having traversed the great poets of the past, via a conversation with opposing but interactive aspects of the self, the poem ends with blasphemy and a sense of being subject to forces beyond poetic control.

This preoccupation with the great poets of the past is also addressed by Bloom in the context of “Ego Dominus Tuus”: “*Ille* knows the esoteric truth of Poetic Influence, that a style (in the largest sense of style) finds a strong new poet not by imitation but by *antithetical* swerve, which *Ille* leads to “the mysterious one,” the anti-self.” To an extent, “Ego Dominus Tuus” seems to be a poem that addresses the manner in which the anti-self may be located in an initial identification with precursor poets, who are “in some sense of your own being”, followed by a stylistic reaction against them. The initial impulse to embrace something outside of oneself is enough to start a silent conversation with your own soul, and this silent dispute must then rage loud and long enough to eclipse even what inspired it.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Ending our song: silence, time and the fragmentation of language in T.S**

#### **Eliot's *The Waste Land*.**

I began this study with the assertion that its intention was not merely to consider the fabric and representations of silence within the writings of four poets who are among the greatest of their various epochs, but also to observe and analyse the extent to which the nature and implications of poetic representations of silence might alter and shift as we traverse the relevant periods up to, and including, Modernism. In order to render this objective the more cohesive, a well-established arc of poetic influence has so far been adhered to. Yet, as we find ourselves arriving finally at Eliot, there seems also to be the danger of fetching up at the end of this convenient curve of consideration. By way of justification for any apparent deviation one may defer to Eliot himself and the assertion in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", that a disruption of apparent cohesiveness need not function as an impediment to structure:

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervening of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly,

altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.

Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.<sup>198</sup>

The admission that the “present is directed by the past” certainly need not denote that there would be no change in trajectory. Indeed, it might be said that all literary movements are shaped by that which came before, insofar as they either function as an attempt to evolve and extend what preceded them, or are the by-product of a partial or complete reaction against it. Certainly Eliot does not see himself as perpetuating the legacy of a poet such as Shelley. He describes that poet as exemplifying a level of immaturity not even attained by such slightly earlier Romantic poets as Wordsworth, a fact that suggests a wish to impugn the individual more than the evolution and condition of the Romantic movement – “I admit that Wordsworth does not present a very pleasing personality either; yet I not only enjoy his poetry as I cannot enjoy Shelley’s, but I enjoy it more than when I first read it.”<sup>199</sup> Eliot’s condemnation of Shelley is grounded in the belief

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<sup>198</sup>T. S. Eliot. *Selected Prose Of T.S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975. p. 38.

<sup>199</sup> It might be said that Eliot himself offers an excellent example of a not uniformly pleasing personality that, nonetheless, was able to construct works of poetic excellence. (T. S. Eliot. *Selected Prose Of T.S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975. p. 81).

that the convictions of his life and his poetry are profoundly unpalatable to the mature consciousness:

The ideas of Shelley seem to me always to be the ideas of adolescence – as there is every reason why they should be. And an enthusiasm for Shelley seems to me also to be an affair of adolescence: for most of us, Shelley has marked an intense period before maturity, but for how many does Shelley remain a companion of age? I confess that I never open the volumes of his poetry simply because I want to read poetry, but only with some special reason for reference. I find his ideas repellent; and the difficulty of separating Shelley from his ideas and beliefs is still greater than with Wordsworth.<sup>200</sup>

Thus, though Eliot allows that all poets may, and must, be considered in the context of their precursors, he seems pre-emptively to acquit himself of the charge of attempting to emulate them. And yet, as we move to consider the treatment of language and silence in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which may be seen as exemplifying “(the really new) work of art”, we find that even echoes of the poet he despised have been ingested by it. *The Waste Land*, after all, is a poem that draws repeatedly upon much of the great literature that preceded it, not so much in

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<sup>200</sup>T. S. Eliot. *Selected Prose Of T.S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975. p. 81.

an effort to establish the resonance of the past as to illuminate the contrast between past and present, and the effect of modernity upon poetic language.

The poem's epigraph, though unconnected with the wider narrative of the poem (which is, itself, neither cohesive nor sequential but instead infused with a thematic accord) nonetheless serves to inflect what follows with the suggestion that we are arriving at some kind of muted but ineluctable breaking point:

"For I once saw with my own eyes the Cumean Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her, 'Sibyl, what do you want? she answered, 'I want to die'".<sup>201</sup>

Already it seems that the atoms of the past are being artificially compressed together in order to retain something that nature dictates should have broken down and been dispersed. The single phrase that is spoken – "I want to die" – signals a longing for a release from even the language required to articulate the sentiment. Sibyl's life has, by this point, shrunk (almost in manner of Echo, but in a fashion more obviously grotesque) to little more than the voice with which she begs to be rid of it. Thus the subsequent poem is coloured by the suggestion that silence is not so much the condition that language seeks to combat and evade, as it is its conscious and desired objective. Consequently, we find ourselves in the unusual position of beginning a poem that is already inflected by the notion that its

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<sup>201</sup>T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 3, note 1.

objective may be its own annihilation and that its very existence may be in some way an aberration.

From this we transition into part 1 of the poem, “The Burial of the Dead” and immediately encounter four vignettes that, though radically different in specific content and the nature of the personas from whom they appear to emanate, seem thematically harmonized through a mutual suggestion of displacement, and an inability to reconcile past and present.

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

Winter kept us warm, covering

Earth in forgetful snow, feeding

A little life with dried tubers. (1-7)

Here we see the opening of the Spring - in Romantic poetry such a fecund and promising season - depicted as dependent upon a macabre cannibalism.<sup>202</sup> Rather than a sense of regeneration and dormant fertility revived, the suggestion is one of new life “feeding” upon the “dead land” that renders it possible. The impression is

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<sup>202</sup> Eliot seems to be consciously moving away from such Romantic era poetic depictions of springtime as Wordsworth’s, *I wandered lonely as a cloud*. And yet we must recollect that there is in the title of that poem a suggestion of isolation, coupled with a sense of displacement and perpetual journeying. It may be that Eliot borrows a mood inadvertently in his attempt to react against an image.



that of having emerged from a cocoon of pacifying forgetfulness – “winter kept us warm” – and being now confronted with alien, even hostile scenery.

Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.

And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke’s

My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,

And I was frightened. He said, Marie,

Marie, hold on tight. And down we went. (12-16)<sup>203</sup>

The persona specifically identifies herself as “a true German” which, in light of the fact that the publication date of *The Waste Land* is 1922, some years after the cessation of the First World War (1914-1918), further entrenches a sense of nostalgia for a bygone, insulating gentility where a ride upon a “sled” represented a valid cause for fear.<sup>204</sup> There is also a sense of attempting to retain a grip upon that which so easily slipped away, to the extent that, “hold on tight” becomes a poignant double entendre.<sup>205</sup> The allusion to the “arch-duke”, though it could, of course, refer to any number of Slavic or Prussian arch-dukes, naturally conjures recollections of the impetus for the First World War, and the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria. Thus Eliot has begun his poem with a glimpse of a woman whose environment has become, if not extinct, than certainly less hospitable. She is a person that circumstance has moved outside of the habitat

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<sup>203</sup>T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 5, note 5.

<sup>204</sup>T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.

<sup>205</sup> This reactionary impulse is well contextualised by Sanja Bahun when she observes, “no approach to modernism has doubted the movement’s intrinsic link to modernization.” (Sanja Bahun. *Modernism And Melancholia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. p. 2).

that fashioned her and there is a pungent sense of her being unsuited to the temporal sphere she must now navigate. Concurrently, the representation of springtime at the beginning of the vignette becomes fiercely symbolic of the fact that any attempt to repair what has been eradicated would be tantamount to reconstructing the past upon a pile of buried corpses, an image that Eliot returns to less evasively in the final segment of this first section of the poem. What we are seeing here is a culture that is being unobtrusively squeezed into silence and oblivion, speaking the language of the past in the unfamiliar landscape of the present.

After such an introduction to the limbo-like state of a past that cannot be resuscitated and a present that cannot be authentically inhabited, we find ourselves next confronted by a frank and insidiously prophetic barrenness:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only  
There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you

Or you shadow at evening rising to meet you;

I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (19-30)

Even in this most parched and sterile landscape there still remain a few tenacious “roots” and “branches”, as though the memory of a lost fertility is enough to engender a quixotic belief in the possibility of a renewed sense of life and belonging. And yet the feeling is that the relationships between man and nature, humanity and the present, have become profoundly inharmonious. Whereas, in the penultimate line of the first vignette, we seem at least to find a terse and contracted rendition of what Shelley so richly articulated in *Mont Blanc*, “In the mountains, there you feel free.” (17), by the time we arrive at the second there is nothing but disunity and isolation. Instead we are invited to “(Come in under the shadow” so that we may encounter the “fear” which is all that remains of our disintegrating relationship with the natural world. It is at this point that Eliot introduces one of the poem’s many specific quotations from previous great works of art, a motif that serves to entrench an ever-increasing sense of the fragmentation of language and history in the context of the modern world. It also seems to synchronize with the idea of the breakdown of the poetic relationship with nature, which, in Shelleyan terms, heralds a drying up of creative language.

*Frisch weht der Wind*

*Der Heimat zu*

*Mein Irisch Kind,*

*Wo weilest du? (31-34)*<sup>206</sup>

The question, “Where do you wait?” is, as ever, rendered the more resonant because of the lack of an answer. The implication is apparently that most familiar longing of modernism, the impulse to return to a metaphorical homeland, or a place in which a sense of belonging is possible, and the recognition that this cannot be achieved. The frankly un-sustaining landscape in which humanity finds themselves in the aftermath of the Great War, and against the backdrop of accelerating industrialization, is, Eliot would seem to suggest, one in which humanity struggles for self-expression; a fact that necessarily mutates and tarnishes the landscape of language and poetry. Consequently, the second half of the vignette is suffused with a picturesque nostalgia that contrasts fiercely but (as must always be the case with nostalgia) hopelessly, with the desolate, overshadowed landscapes of the preceding half:

“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;

“They called me the hyacinth girl.”

- Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither

Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,

Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

*Oed' und leer das Meer. (35-42)*

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<sup>206</sup>T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 6 note 1.

It is the dash immediately after the closing speech marks that seems to indicate a shift in mood, as though representative of the abyss that separates past and present, the living of a richly picturesque moment and the recollection of it when viewed through the discoloured lenses of hindsight. Indeed, the subsequent lines seem inundated with a premonition of how far the future will come to distance the speaker from that moment. The failure of first speech and then sight transports him into a condition of limbo and a “nothing” that, unlike what we saw in Yeats, is as intangible and non-specific as it is all-encompassing. There is, in fact, almost a seductive quality to this evaporation of the corporeal and it is interesting to note that “at the heart of light” we find “the silence” that seems to be the place to which the poem is trying to escape. I say ‘escape’ rather than ‘arrive’ since this is what differentiates *The Waste Land* from what we previously encountered in Shelley and Browning, though perhaps not so consistently in Yeats. Before Eliot, the stimuli for much of the poetry considered appeared to be the need to imprint itself upon the overarching silence it temporarily eclipsed and stain “the white radiance of eternity” (463).<sup>207</sup> With Eliot, there seems rather the impulse to be engulfed by a monumental silence and emptiness that is more embracing and picturesque than both the un-sustaining present and the disintegrating components of a past that cannot be recaptured or rejuvenated. Thus the concluding quotation from “Tristan and Isolde”, “Oed’ und leer das Meer.”, though it speaks of desolation and

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<sup>207</sup> *Adonais*.

emptiness, seems to instil a peculiar sense of calm; the un-ruptured magnitude of the ‘empty’ sea eclipsing the “dry stone” and “red rock” that overshadows us.<sup>208</sup>

From this we move abruptly into the vignette of the clairvoyant, “Madame Sosostri”, a name derived from Aldous Huxley’s novel *Crome Yellow*.<sup>209</sup> Here the tone of the poem shifts to a casually conversational note that, at times, borders on the whimsical, “Madame Sosostri, famous clairvoyante, / Had a bad cold, nevertheless / Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe.” (43-45). There is a self-satirizing quality to this juxtaposition of the human and the divining that is further entrenched by the allusions to cards that do not in fact exist in the tarot pack, “Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks.” (49).<sup>210</sup> This sense of irreverence, and the tawdry, brittle farce of it all, is exacerbated by the knowledge that the character in the novel from which Eliot derived the name was, in fact, a man masquerading as a woman:

“Mr Scogan had been accommodated in a little canvas hut”.<sup>211</sup> Dressed in a black skirt and red bodice, with a yellow-and-red bandanna handkerchief tied round his black wig, he looked – sharp-nosed, brown, and wrinkled... A placard pinned to a

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<sup>208</sup> “Desolate and Empty is the sea”. (T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 6, note 3).

<sup>209</sup> T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 6 note 4.

<sup>210</sup> T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 6 note 7.

<sup>211</sup> T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 40.

curtain of the doorway announced the presence within the tend of ‘Sosostris, the Sorceress of Ecbatana’.”<sup>212</sup>

Fate, far from being the grandiose and inexorable authority of the classical epics, has become the stuff of frauds and philistines and the province of the bourgeoisie. The impression that resonates is one of the erosion of that elemental material out of which poetry was first fashioned. Fate and war are subjects for fairground fodder, devoid of the gravitas they once wielded – “ ‘Is there going to be another war’, asked the old lady to whom he had predicted this end. ‘Very soon’, said Mr Scogan, with an air of quiet confidence.”<sup>213</sup> And yet, even in the midst of this palpable absurdity, there remains a sense of foreboding, “The Hanged Man, Fear death by water. / I see crowds of people walking round in a ring” (55-56). While fate may have withered on the poetic vine there still exists a sense of fatality and hopelessness, as though we have arrived at a colourless and circular existence from which there seems no prospect of escape.

This motif of “crowds of people, walking round in a ring” is both continued and magnified in the final vignette of “The Burial of the Dead”, what Eliot called “his adaptation of Charles Baudelaire’s “Formillants cite” from his poem “Le sept vieillards” in “Les Fleurs du Mal.”<sup>214</sup>

#### Unreal City,

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<sup>212</sup>T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.p. 40.

<sup>213</sup>T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.p. 41.

<sup>214</sup>T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.p. 7, note 9.

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,  
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.  
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying, "Stetson!  
"You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!  
"That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
"Or has the sudden fog disturbed its bed?  
"Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,  
"Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!  
"You! Hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, - mon frère!" (60-

76)

Although there is a ghostly and supernatural quality to both the Baudelaire original and the Eliot vignette, Baudelaire's descriptions are far more putrid and palpable, in a manner that seems intended to denote both humanity's moral disintegration and its hybrid loathing of self and environment, "his old shoes trampled on the



dead / In hatred, not indifference to life.” (27-28).<sup>215</sup> The forms of the malevolent old man proceed to multiply into seven, “For one by one I counted seven times / Multiples of this sinister old man!” (35-36), with the implication being that only the poet’s decision to turn “his back” (44) spares him from viewing a further increase in their numbers. The old men, however remain both defined and distinct from each other in a fashion that Eliot’s flowing crowd on London Bridge does not. Baudelaire’s emphasis is upon the ubiquity and epidemic nature of human corruption while Eliot’s is upon the eradication of identity and the all-encompassing futility of the cycle of human existence, as well as the sheer vastness of the numbers of those who have already undergone the inevitable, “I had not thought death had undone so many.” The line itself is, of course, Eliot’s translation of Dante’s comment in *The Inferno* on viewing the helpless inhabitants of Limbo (where the souls of the unbaptized were supposedly sent), and the bewildered simplicity of the remark seems to do justice to the poignancy of what even the sinless must suffer, simply by virtue of being born.<sup>216</sup> It also serves to consolidate the differences with the Baudelaire original since Eliot is pondering the extent of human futility rather than human corruption. Nonetheless, the allusion to the original “Unreal City” indicates his awareness that there is universality in both conditions, but Eliot’s decision to focus upon the quietly corrosive, instead of the obviously grotesque, is symptomatic of the decline in

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<sup>215</sup> Charles Baudelaire. *The Flowers of Evil*. Trans. James McGowan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>216</sup> T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.p. 7, note 1.

emphasis that Post-war society has undergone. No diabolical apparitions populate Eliot's "City" or, if they do, they are eclipsed by the seeping, metastasizing sameness that obscures the foul and the fair indiscriminately.<sup>217</sup> I am reminded of Yeats's later "Cuchulain Comforted" with its chorus of shrouded figures seeking to engulf the great mythological hero of ancient Ireland.

Contrastingly, however, Eliot appears to offer some momentary, vague rebellion from the flowing images and the surrounding "dead sound" when a speaker cries out to a companion of bygone military conflicts, "Stetson! / "You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!". The choice of battle is doubly arresting, both for its temporal incongruity, and in light of the fact that the Roman/Carthaginian wars were on a level of wilful destructiveness akin to the First World War.<sup>218</sup> Thus Eliot extends the theme of broadening sameness to encompass the cyclical, repetitive fabric of human history itself. The subsequent series of unanswered questions about the condition of the "corpse [Stetson] planted" recalls us both to the carnivorous fertility of the first vignette and to the grotesque actuality of post-war society being, literally and figuratively, built upon the graves of dead men. Eliot seems to be reminding us that this is a subject upon which people prefer to be silent, especially when both impetus and aftermath have

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<sup>217</sup> Eliot is in fact describing the route he took to work. (T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.p. 7, note 2).

<sup>218</sup>T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.p. 6, note 3.

failed to merit the sacrifice.<sup>219</sup> Eliot alludes to Cornelia's funeral dirge for her murdered son, Marcello, in John Webster's *The White Devil* (a play also populated with needless destruction) through the line, "“Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to me,”".<sup>220</sup> Cornelia is one of only two authentically moral figures throughout a play that showcases the extensive and varied forms of human moral perversion and it is significant that, as a result of the kaleidoscopic depravity of her family and associates, she is driven mad.<sup>221</sup>

Here it is worth observing that the entire second half of this vignette has consisted of apparently nonsensical talk punctuated by questions that not only are unanswered but would appear to be unanswerable, "“That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / “Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?”. As with the character of Cornelia, language appears to have lost specificity and meaning in a fashion that, though constructed to seem accidentally personally revealing, denotes a larger societal decline. It is a decline that Eliot returns to Baudelaire to emphasise through his employment of the famous conclusion of that poet's "To the Reader", "“You! Hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, - mon frère!”". Eliot's decision to muddle French and English words in his rendering of the line

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<sup>219</sup> It is a thought that harmonises with Irwin's remark in *The History Boys*, "It's not 'lest we forget', it's 'lest we remember'" (Alan Bennett. *The History Boys*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2006, Act 1).

<sup>220</sup> T.S Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 7, note 4.

<sup>221</sup> Cornelia, inexplicably, ends by asking forgiveness of her son Flamineo, who she is aware in fact murdered her other son. There is a complete breakdown of comprehension and loss of direction in her language. Sense becomes purely accidental, as when she calls Flamineo "grave-maker". (John Webster. *The White Devil*. Ed. J.R. Brown. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996. Act V, Scene IV, p. 151).

heightens both the impression of confusion and the suggestion of a breakdown in language and self-expression. Like his predecessor, however, he places the dashes before and after the “mon semblable”, as though to signify the abyss between past and present; identity as it was, and as it has become. It is also noteworthy that the final stanza of the Baudelaire poem refers to the greatest evil confronting humanity as the condition of “Ennui”, which is decidedly not a communicative condition.<sup>222</sup> Once again we see the implication that what generates devastation in this greying and strangely evacuated world cannot be those things out of which great epics were fashioned but rather the continuous, corrosive sameness that, like the body of Sybil, is what the former beauty of human life, landscape and language has deteriorated into.

Before transitioning into Part II of the poem it is worth pausing to note the conceptual similarity between this final vignette of Part I and Wilfred Owen’s “Strange Meeting”, in which the poet dreams an encounter with an enemy soldier he has previously killed. Here the poet seems to be sifting through the sleeping figures of the dead until suddenly he encounters a familiar one, “Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared / With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,” (6-7).<sup>223</sup> The subsequent monologue touches upon themes of human sameness - “Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also;” (16-17) – as well as possibilities annihilated and the diminishment of environment:

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<sup>222</sup> Charles Baudelaire. *The Flowers of Evil*. Trans. James McGowan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>223</sup> Wilfred Owen. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Cecil Day Lewis, and Edmund Blunden New York: New Directions, 1964.

I went hunting wild  
After the wildest beauty in the world,  
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,  
But mocks the steady running of the hour,  
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.  
For by my glee might many men have laughed,  
And of my weeping something has been left,  
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,  
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

Now men will go content with what we spoiled. (17-27)

Written in 1918, Owen's poem pre-dates *The Waste Land* and may have served as an impetus for Eliot's final vignette, saturated as it is with a sense of imposed displacement and the impossibility of recapturing the beauty and possibilities of the past.<sup>224</sup> There is also a quiet nod to the troubling adaptability of humankind who will, the speaker predicts, become used to a lesser condition, even to the point of contentment. Perhaps it may be said that Owen's prescience lay in the recognition that the cataclysmic nature of war would warp and redefine emphasis in a manner that served to lower, rather than elevate, expectations. It is a

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<sup>224</sup> The German soldier's descriptions regarding his grand, past life are strangely reminiscent of the sketches made by the Hyacinth girl. Whether the similarities are deliberate or coincidental, a comparison of theme and mood between the two poems is equally enriching.

perversity that approaches the boundaries of paradox but it is, necessarily, in such borderlands that the living ghosts of both poems are to be found.

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The theme of contraction and diminishment is extended into part II of the poem, “A Game of Chess”, but with the focus shifted suddenly towards the sexual (which is not by any means to suggest the “romantic”). The title itself carries a flavour of both the farcical and the unfaithful, referring to Thomas Middleton’s play of the same name, and another by him entitled *Women Beware Women*.<sup>225</sup>

The Chair she sat in like a burnished throne,  
Glowed on the marble, where the glass  
Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines  
From which a golden Cupidon peeped out  
(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)  
Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra  
Reflecting light upon the table as  
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,  
From satin cases poured in rich profusion;  
In vials of ivory and coloured glass  
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,

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<sup>225</sup>T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 8.

Unguent, powdered, or liquid – troubled, confused  
And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air  
Flung their smoke into the laquearia,  
Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling. (77-93)

The opening line itself contracts the golden “barge” described by Enobarbus in his speech in *Antony and Cleopatra* into a simple “Chair”, while the “water” is transmuted into the motionless chill of a marble floor.<sup>226</sup> The continuing description, though lavishly ornate, ultimately serves to depict what one might term the implied poverty of excess. Instead of the gorgeous linguistic feast of the Shakespearean original, Eliot, seemingly deliberately, saturates the syntax with cloying descriptions that at first appear merely self-satirizing but finally border on the sinister, “lurked her strange synthetic perfumes, / Unguent, powdered, or liquid – troubled, confused / And drowned the sense in odours”.<sup>227</sup> The impression of something crouching or hovering, awaiting a moment of weakness with the objective of further disordering the senses, serves to set the scene for the simultaneously random, but pointedly manipulative, discourse of the seated woman. Before we arrive at that, however, we are presented with the motif of Philomel and the nightingale, which functions much as the epigraph of Sibyl does

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<sup>226</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act II, Scene ii. (William Shakespeare. *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells, and Gary Taylor Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>227</sup> The list of perfumes and objects conjures recollections of Alexander Pope’s satirical depiction of the empty-headed, beautiful Belinda’s dressing table in *The Rape of the Lock*. “Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux” (Canto 1). (Alexander Pope. *The Rape Of The Lock And Other Major Writings*. Ed. Leopold Damrosch London: Penguin Books, 2011.).

with the poem in its entirety in its capacity to inflect the mood of what follows without participating in the overarching narrative.

The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale  
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,  
“Jug Jug” to dirty ears. (99-103)

The myth in question concerns King Tereus's rape of his wife, Procne's, beautiful younger sister Philomel and his barbaric decision to cut out her tongue in the hope of silencing her. With the help of a woven tapestry, Philomel is eventually able to convey these events to her sister, who exacts a terrible vengeance against her husband.<sup>228</sup> Ultimately, all three are transformed into birds, in Philomel's case, a nightingale.<sup>229</sup> It may be pertinent to consider that the function of metamorphosis in Greek mythology is often to obviate the necessity for a final emotional and verbal reckoning between individuals who have pushed the limits of inhumanity into uncharted territory. It is as if the mere possibility of human consciousness and language having to navigate such an arena prompts a spontaneous (or divinely implemented) reconfiguration of the body into a state where language cannot be accessed. Philomel stands as the collateral damage of this formula, since she is neither the perpetrator of the initial crime nor of the revenge exacted for it. Rather

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<sup>228</sup>T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. pp. 46-50.

<sup>229</sup>T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. pp. 46-50.



she has been caught, unguarded, in the no man's land of the worst that humankind has to offer, to which neither her voice nor her identity can be permitted to stand as a witness. It may be argued that her metamorphosis is a form of compensation for the obliteration of her voice (since it returns to her a vocal capacity of a kind) but, as ever in Grecian metamorphosis, it is a voice without language that is destined never to tell the story of its own origin. The "inviolable voice" of which the poem speaks is, perhaps, only that because it neither offers language nor heralds sexuality, the unmusical "Jug Jug" being all that it may emit. And yet still there is the superlative loneliness of the languageless state that fills "all the desert" (and it must be desert), as well as the lingering stain of sexual violation in the "dirty ears" that overhear it. Philomel may have been transmuted into a state where she has no need to raise her voice in protestation but it is a perverse compensation, and an impoverished freedom, that requires a change in the oppressed in order to correct the impulse of the oppressor.

This mood-shifting interlude propels us into the disordered speech of the seated woman, which appears to be addressed to a lover or husband who is conspicuous for nothing so much as his silence.

"My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

"Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.

"What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

"I never know what you are thinking. Think.'" (111-114)

The maniacal contrariness of the consecutive demands to speak and then to think, as well as the inability to wait for an answer to the sequential questions, suggests a profound terror on the part of the speaker regarding what both her lover's silence or speech, were either permitted to flourish, might convey. The concern may not be an unreasonable one in light of the immediately subsequent lines which, though they are not specifically attributed to either Eliot or the listener, could emanate from either, a circumstance that serves to suggest a degree of identification between the poet and the silent auditor.<sup>230</sup>

“I think we are in rats’ alley

Where dead men lost their bones.

Again we have the breakdown of structure, though this time in the more corporal sense of the disintegration of the human skeleton, but even more significantly we are introduced to the notion that, in the world of *The Waste Land*, a lover may not listen to the disordered ramblings of neurotic affection with either a reciprocal fervency or a semblance of respect. This is a woman whose scenery conjures recollections of Cleopatra and Dido – “Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling” – perhaps the most salient prototypes of the beautiful, passionate women of history who were, ultimately, disappointed by their lovers.<sup>231</sup> And yet their disappointment was preceded by grandiose language and arrayed in the afterglow

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<sup>230</sup> This is another dimension of what we previously considered in Browning... not that the silent listener might be a stand-in for the reader, but that he might be designed to tacitly illuminate the perspective of the poet.

<sup>231</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 8, notes 7 and 8.

of a one-time mutual devotion. Certainly their actions may have been extreme, and their mode of romantic expression oppressive to the point of deranged, but their place in history, and depiction in literature, have served to render both aesthetic and congruous. Not so this woman of *The Waste Land*, who must deliver her romantic rants to a silent recipient whose only thought appears to be for the ugliness of the mood and images they engender. Essentially, Eliot appears to be both heralding and building upon a motif of modernist literature, which is the fact of romantic neuroses having been orphaned by authentic romance. Romance in modernism has become more outwardly laconic; its great loves often being demonstrated through what remains unspoken and undone than through what is noisily protested or showily executed. It is interesting to note that, for romantic protestations in this literary epoch, we are often required to look to the internal monologue, another example of the eloquence of a literary motif that is dependent on silence.<sup>232</sup> The continuing speech of the woman that we here encounter in *The Waste Land* seems to exhibit a cognizance of this newfound poverty in both her constant references to nothingness and her allusions to the beauty of bygone literature:

“What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?”

Nothing again nothing.

“Do you know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

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<sup>232</sup> A salient example would be Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*.

Nothing?"

I remember

Those are pearls that were in his eyes.

"Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?"

But (117-127)

The impulse to sympathize with the silent man who is so besieged by the tedium of repetition is stilled somewhat by a recognition of the skullful of isolation contained within the notion that anyone, in a given moment, might feel like the only individual able to recollect the past in the midst of a present that bears no resemblance to it. The indentation of the "I remember" immediately preceding the allusion to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* seems to set the speaker apart from her own epoch and, while it does not wholly expunge the impression of a second-rate Cleopatra railing against an Antony who has barely troubled to step onto the stage, it does go some way to accounting for it.<sup>233</sup>

Attention, however, must be paid to the isolated "But" that seems almost to attempt to answer the woman's question before collapsing back into the indolent and provoking variation of the "Shakespeherian Rag" (128).<sup>234</sup> It is as though, for an instant, the silent lover intends to protest and contract the abyss of impulse and

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<sup>233</sup> The aesthetic of the scene is not unlike Cleopatra brooding over Antony's absence in Rome. The aspect that renders *The Waste Land* tableau so obviously more pathetic, however, is that the male counterpart is physically present while being, for all practical and emotional purposes, elsewhere.

<sup>234</sup> The misspelling of "Shakespeherian" satirically emphasises the aspirate, not unlike a flamboyant phonetic rendering of the word, "dahrling!". It seems intended to lay emphasis on the extent to which faux gentility and intellect have come to supplant authentic class and education, in Eliot's mind.

understanding separating himself from the speaker, an abyss represented by the position of the word itself upon the page. This spasm in the direction of authentic discourse is, however, quickly replaced with a relapse back into an apparent non sequitur, “O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag- / It’s so elegant / So intelligent”. It could be argued that the cavernous and repeated “O’s” are themselves representative of the very nothingness that the woman has previously complained of, and the allusion to the “Shakespeherian Rag” a fiercely ironic means of recalling us to the dead past she has also bemoaned the loss of through the reference to the “pearls that were his eyes”. The fact of the lovers making the same point in a different way, however, rather than presenting a point of identity, seems only to widen the void and further exhibit the contraction and confusion of romantic expression. Even in moments when their feelings are symmetrical, the lovers of *The Waste Land* do not speak the same language.

“What shall I do now? What shall I do?

“I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street

“With my hair down so. What shall we do tomorrow?

“What shall we ever do?

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door. (131-

138)

The sentiment of the woman's speech is one echoed by Daisy in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) when she languidly and deliberately enquires, " 'What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon?... 'and the day after that, and the next 30 years?' ".<sup>235</sup> Again we find an echo of Baudelaire's terror of ennui and it is poignant to note that the male lover's internal response is not a solution but rather an acknowledgement of the impossibility of such a thing. The prosaic allusions to routine and distractions from boredom in the form of "a game of chess" are heightened by the suggestion that life itself may be a condition of permanently "lidless eyes" from which only death, "a knock upon the door", might liberate us. It is also worth reflecting upon the architecture of the poem and the fashion in which punctuation and indentation entrench a sense of separation. The woman's words are encased in speech marks, suggesting their audibility, while the male lover's responses continue to be unspoken. The physical separation of her speech and his thoughts, in the form of the long indentation preceding, "The hot water at ten" also serves to represent the gap existent between two individuals whose relationship is supposed to be emblematic of closeness. In place of passionate soliloquies we have the unanswered and unanswerable questions of the one and the silence of the other, and the elemental disunity this serves to represent.

Here, and without any visual indication of a shift in narrative or focus, Eliot segues into what appears to be a London public house where one female is

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<sup>235</sup>F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*. Ed. Matthew J Bruccoli. New York: Scribner, 1996.

conveying to another the nature of a conversation she has had with a mutual friend about what that friend ought to do in order to retain her husband (Albert's) sexual interest.

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said –

I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.

He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you  
to get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.

You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,

He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you

And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,

He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time, (142-148)

The abrupt nature of the shift in narrative seems, paradoxically, to denote a degree of identity between the two, apparently radically different, romantic relationships depicted or considered. The one might be said to be emblematic of the hysterical inharmoniousness of affluent romance, where conversations run parallel to each other and silence and disordered speech communicate discord. The other is its impoverished counterpart, a squalid monologue in which unimaginative, and

apparently unprovoked, venom saturates every brick of what can almost be described as a “wall of talk”.<sup>236</sup>

But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling,

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.

(And her only thirty-one.)

It has been suggested by Seamus Perry, that the speaker, while “intrusive” may possibly be “well-meaning”.<sup>237</sup> Conceivable as such an interpretation is, the gossipy tone, as well as the fact of it being conveyed to a third-party, indicates a degree of relish and indiscretion that makes authentic concern for the subject on the part of the speaker appear unlikely. It also seems improbable that, unless afflicted by a titanic tactlessness, the speaker would have proffered her advice in so offensive a fashion or, knowing as she does of Lil's near-fatal brush with childbirth, speak so dismissively of her reluctance to have more offspring and, consequently, her use of abortive medication.

She said, pulling a long face,

It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said,

(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)

The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same.

You *are* a proper fool, I said.

Well if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said.

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<sup>237</sup>Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 80.



What you get married for if you don't want children? (158-164)

There is something particularly sinister and duplicitous in the simultaneous encouragement to enhanced sexual attractiveness, and the censure for fearing the fruits of it, as well as the disingenuous question regarding Lil's reason for getting married that comes immediately after a prolonged clarification of the speaker's awareness of precisely what other reasons motivate such unions. The monologue reads far more like the outpourings of an embittered, and quite possibly jealous, middle-aged female who is determined to denigrate a slightly younger (if rather careworn) acquaintance who happens to be married to a man she may herself find desirable (she has certainly dedicated more than usual consideration to the fulfilment of his sexual preferences). Indeed, the speaker, through an apparently reflexive excess of rhetoric, illuminates her own possible motive for this tirade of unsolicited advice and gloating criticism by informing the listener of Lil's "straight look" and assertion that she would "know who to thank" were Albert to be unfaithful. Ironically, it is a combination of this awareness, and the exaggerated unpleasantness of the advice given, that might incentivize poor Lil to adhere to suggestions she was never intended to follow.

In essence, however, the monologue's purpose reaches beyond its own specific subject matter and becomes emblematic, both of how excessive, ill-conceived speech may exhibit what ought to be kept hidden, as well as how the sheer quantity of superfluous rhetoric has come to supplant authentic discourse and form the substance of the theoretically circumspect and sacred. The parrot-like

repetition of “I said” seems to interact with the more sonorous and disembodied quintuple, “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME” (141, 152, 165, 168, 169), in a manner that suggests it must be time for something far less trivially unpleasant than this exchange and, more significantly, that time itself may be beginning to outrun language. The decision to close with Ophelia’s parting words to Queen Gertrude and King Claudius in *Hamlet* further indicates that this may, indeed, be what Eliot hopes for if romantic union has truly been whittled down to the repulsive effects of back-alley abortions and the bathos of dental reconstructive surgery as a means of regaining sexual attractiveness.

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good  
night. (Act IV, Scene v)<sup>238</sup>

It seems that the poet wishes to convey that we have here a far greater, and far uglier, madness than Ophelia’s, now that language has ceased to be a solace or thing of beauty and become, instead, something from which we must escape before even silence is diminished by it (the word “diminished” seems judicious since it denotes both a lessening of quantity and quality). And yet there is still a flutter of the simple beauty of the doomed Ophelia’s words that permeates the chatter, but it is a beauty that both hurts and soothes the ear, since it offers solace only insofar as it recalls us to what we have lost. The fashion of Ophelia’s death is also about to be echoed in the opening lines of the immediately following third

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<sup>238</sup>William Shakespeare. *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells, and Gary Taylor Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon Press, 1986.

section of the poem, “The river’s tent is broken” (173), but the drowning imagery reaches beyond the literal and draws us back to the texture of the language we have so recently almost been submerged by.<sup>239</sup> It may be that to have described it as a “wall of talk”, relentless and impermeable as it is, was less precise than to have understood it as a rising flood, obscuring not only all that came before but also threatening to immerse all that might have come after.

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We come now to part III, “The Fire Sermon”, taken from an address of the same name preached by the Buddha on the dangers of worldly concerns and the “consuming powers of human passion” that, in his mind, functioned to the detriment of the authentically holy condition.<sup>240241</sup>

... the body is on fire; things tangible are on fire, \*\*\* the mind is on fire; ideas are on fire; \*\*\* mind-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the mind are on fire; and whatever sensations, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the mind, that is also on fire.

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<sup>239</sup> As Seamus Perry observes, “it is with a river that the next section begins” (Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 81).

<sup>240</sup>T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.p. 11, note 1.

<sup>241</sup> “Only by acquiring a scrupulous obliviousness to [human passion] is a person able to attain freedom from the omnipresent and tortuous depravity that otherwise characterizes the bodily life.” (Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 81).

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Perceiving this, O priests, the learned and noble disciple conceives and aversion for the eye... conceives and aversion for the mind, conceives an aversion for ideas, conceives an aversion for mind-consciousness, conceives an aversion for the impressions received by the mind; and whatever sensations, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received from the mind, for this also he conceives an aversion. And in conceiving this aversion, he becomes divested of passion, and by the absence of passion he becomes free, and when he is free he becomes aware that he is free; and he knows that re-birth is exhausted, that he has lived the hold life, that he has done what it behoved him to do, and that he is no more of this world.<sup>242</sup>

My intention in quoting this particular portion of the translated sermon is to preface all subsequent analysis of this section of the poem with that notion of contradictory, yet coexisting, conditions that seems to so well synthesise with a consideration of silence and poetry. The idea of a populated nothingness, as we saw in Yeats, or the expressive silence of a listener in Browning, is here, with Eliot, transmuted into something closer to a theology. To imbue the subsequent lines with the flavour and fabric of “The Fire Sermon” suggests a sympathy on the part of the poet for the idea of divesting oneself of unnecessary cargo and attaining

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<sup>242</sup> Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922, pp. 350-351.

that state of wisdom which is, paradoxically, the product of the absence of everything, including knowledge. This emphasis on the anti-intellectual is, perhaps, ironic in a poem so suffused with allusions to a rich, intellectual and aesthetic past but we must recall that they are all splintered and obscured allusions to a fragmented, and sometimes obliterated, past.

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf  
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind  
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.  
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.  
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,  
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends  
Or other testimony to summer nights. The nymphs are departed.  
And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;  
Departed, have left no addresses.  
By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...  
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,  
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.  
But at my back in the cold blast I hear  
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

(173-186)

The opening line is curious, insofar as it seems initially to offer an increase of moisture from what we encountered in Part 1, and yet, on closer inspection, to

suggest the image of a river that is drying up. A broken “tent” signifies a collapsed canopy, a shape that a river can only achieve when the water has dried up and left a soggy cleft, or “wet bank” into which, “fingers of leaf clutch and sink”. The “brown land” too is suggestive of nothing so much as mud, as is the affirmation that no “empty bottles” or other residue of “summer nights” is buoyed up by the current. The seasonal choice is also deliberate, implying as it does that summer, metaphorically and literally, has passed and we are now inhabiting a less fertile period. Following the Ophelia drowning imagery, and the deluge-like language of the preceding section, this return to an emphasis on a parched condition seems contradictory. And yet the overarching theme is one of decay and diminishment since, whether it be profusion or paucity, Eliot is reminding us that we are dealing in dangerous extremes.

Again we find the essence of co-existing contradictions at the nucleus of the thought; we may be drowned by too much of the wrong language, or dehydrated by too little of the sustaining kind but, either way, a form of aesthetic and intellectual death is equally certain. One can trace a line back to the last section of Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* in the “unheard” wind: “unheard” either because there is now no poetry potent enough to give it voice, or because recollections of its poetic past are increasingly faded and fractured. Indeed the line, “The nymphs are departed”, that is so notably and forlornly repeated, seems almost intended to suggest the more costly assertion, “The Muse [is] departed”, preceding, as it does, the first of the triple Spenserian allusions, “Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my

song.”<sup>243</sup> The imagery remains ambiguous enough to prevent a definitive interpretation, but it allows space for the thought that the Thames did indeed run softly until all Muses’ songs were ended and what remained were only flowing crowds, handfuls of dust, and broken tents where water used to live. As Seamus Perry suggests, “the temper of the lines is elegiac and sorry, as though a whole tradition of poetry were coming to an end.”<sup>244</sup> I would diverge from this statement only insofar as I suspect the continuation of the poem makes room for a substitution of the singular, “a whole tradition of poetry”, for the collective and more final ‘*the* whole’. Eliot, disinclined as he was to be hampered by affiliation with any one tradition, appears rather to be mourning the universal demise of poetry itself, as though his poem were envisaging, even as it fights against, a silence waiting to envelop the poetic tradition.

And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;  
Departed, have left no addresses.  
By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...  
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,  
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.  
But at my back in a cold blast I hear  
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.  
(180-186)

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<sup>243</sup>T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 11, note 2.

<sup>244</sup>Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. pp. 82-83.

There is a sense of bathos to be found in this second half of the first section in the notion of nymphs befriending the indolent heirs of bureaucrats. Again we have an emphasis on the incongruity of classical entities in the modern sphere. Even their long-standing poetic refuge can no longer house them, or keep them safe from the spread of an intervening modernity that makes interlopers out of past idols. The almost satirical absurdity of the prosaic crossed with the preeminent seems likely to seep into Eliot's restatement of the Spenserian line, but the simple poignancy of his alternative unobtrusively quivers into pathos. "I speak not loud or long" is all that Eliot requires to exemplify the fading voice of poetry and the winding down of the poetic tradition, which cannot seem to withstand the march and make-up of the modern world. As Perry reminds us, Spenser's original line is the refrain from his "Prothalamion", a poem written in celebration of marriage, both specific and general, and this is a "bruising sort of prologue to the bleak scene of seduction that forms the centrepiece of both Part III and, as Eliot's note tells us, the poem as a whole."<sup>245</sup> Perhaps it might be said that *The Waste Land* exhibits not only the decline of romance in the human sphere but also the tacit uncoupling of romance and poetry.

We next have Marvell's "winged chariot" in the penultimate line, which seems to chivvy us onward to derisive mirth in the form of the pejorative

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<sup>245</sup>Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 82.



“chuckle”.<sup>246</sup> Even the “waters of Leman” cannot offer much of an oasis, referential, as they are, to the people of Israel mourning for their lost Jerusalem.<sup>247</sup> Eliot too seems to bemoan a promised land of language and beauty from which he fears we are now either “departed” or, worse perhaps, still occupying, but rendering increasingly unrecognizable. There are hints in the subsequent section that this latter option is indeed what the poet fears:

A rat crept softly through the vegetation  
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank  
While I was fishing in the dull canal  
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse  
Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck  
And on the king my father’s death before him.  
White bodies naked on the low damp ground  
And bones cast in a little low dry garret  
Rattled by the rat’s foot only, year to year. (187-195)

The rat imagery is one that Eliot returns to in his 1925 poem, *The Hollow Men*, “Or rats’ feet over broken glass / In our dry cellar.” (9-10).<sup>248</sup> It is a poem that is also concerned with the withering of language and the breakdown of form and beauty: “Our dried voices, when / We whisper together / Are quiet and

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<sup>246</sup> “But at my back I always hear / Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near;” (21-22, “To His Coy Mistress”).

<sup>247</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 11, note 3.

<sup>248</sup> T.S Eliot. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber, 2002.

meaningless / As wind in dry glass.” (5-8).<sup>249</sup> Again we have the synthesis of the idea of language and landscape simultaneously drying up, a thought that seems suddenly to return us to Shelley and all that served as poetic inspiration for the Romantics. It is as though Eliot, whether knowingly or otherwise, has ingested the idea of a river as the ideal vehicle for the consummate poetic journey, an image that, as we have seen, originates with, or is strongly influenced by, Shelley’s practice in *Alastor*. Thus the motif of the drying up of water becomes symbolic of the future of the poetic canon and even the intellectual life of the human race. As suggested at the end of the previous paragraph, it should be noted that Eliot is not implying that we have vacated a once fertile landscape but rather that we are living in a fashion that must gradually render it both inhospitable and unrecognizable. Our diminishment in the aftermath of the First World War has become a creeping and seeping one, like the movement of rats and the evaporation of water. No cataclysmic or violently entropic end is predicted, only the quiet spread of mediocrity and linguistic compromise until the world that made poetry possible ends, “not with a bang but a whimper.” (98).<sup>250</sup>

Returning, however, to “The Fire Sermon” here at last in the “dull canal” we seem to have a profusion of real water, neither dried up remnants nor the mirage of an ornate interior décor, but it is prefaced with the putrid image of the “slimy belly” of the rat and described in colourless terms. It is also pointedly

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<sup>249</sup> *The Hollow Men*. T.S Eliot. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber, 2002.

<sup>250</sup> *The Hollow Men*. T.S Eliot. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber, 2002.

significant that Eliot should have made it a “canal”, a man-made channel for water, thus emphasizing both the ugliness and artificiality of the modern condition of the intellectual and poetic journey. Certainly, we are a far cry from the living, moving water traversed by the Poet in *Alastor*. It is also characteristic of the tenor of the poem to juxtapose the image of someone fishing by a gashouse with a jumbled allusion to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*,<sup>251</sup> since it provides us with the signature blend of a confused and disjointed recollection of the past and an unromantic, utilitarian future. The restatement of Ferdinand’s line is a complex one. The substitution of “Musing” for “Weeping” implies an increased callousness and diminishment of feeling of the kind that we already encountered in Part II. Likewise, the replacement of “father” with “brother” suggests a chaotic recollection of the past and a fragmenting of literary history, which is exacerbated by the fact that it seems to be a confused and confusing *Hamlet* allusion. The muddled reference to a “brother” followed by “the king my father’s death” conjures recollections of that greatest of Shakespeare’s play in much the manner that a jumbled crossword puzzle clue might do. But it is the choice of these two plays together that momentarily seems the most disorganized aspect of the extract, until one returns to the theme of displacement, this time both in terms of geography and sense of self. *The Tempest* is a play concerned with a series of characters whom circumstance and conspiracy has shifted from their natural habitat. In their new environment, they have been forced to undergo experiences

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<sup>251</sup>T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 11, note 5.

and locate a sense of self that they might never otherwise have annexed, and that sometimes has diminishing effects. The eponymous character in *Hamlet*, meanwhile, is a young man who no longer feels at home in the environment that fashioned him and is, consequently, at odds with his own identity.<sup>252</sup> Thus we have a kind of inverse thematic synthesis: on the one hand, the notion of making oneself at home in an alien environment and, on the other, how to navigate the sense of being alien while still occupying a familiar space. We find ourselves as a result confronted with perhaps one of the most salient contradictions of modernism; the need to locate a sense of belonging, coupled with the knowledge that this must always remain impossible. It is a condition with which Eliot correctly recognizes even poetry must be careful since, once stated absolutely, its capacity to give rise to poetry would be annihilated. Only through the restrained articulation of imagery, metaphor and allusion can it remain a fertile, not merely futile, concern, and thus it has all the pathos of a question that is forever destined to go unanswered.

Eliot then returns to images of bodily decomposition and the ubiquitous rat motif, as though to more grotesquely expand the theme of deconstruction designed to locate the elemental. It is as if we may not be permitted to remain too long with the aesthetics of the past and must experience the same thought bedecked in all the

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<sup>252</sup> “O that this too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! / Or that the / Everlasting had not fix’d / His canon ’gainst self-slaughter!” (Act I, Scen ii). The opening of Hamlet’s first major soliloquy, in which he bemoans his condition and need to remain in the now altered environment of his home. (William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*. Ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor London: Arden Shakespeare. 2006).

ugliness of a present that is simultaneously curtailing our outlets for self-expression, and increasing our need for them. Again we feel that Eliot is reminding us that he is writing his way into silence, a fact that makes his use of the first person appear pointed. Unlike the moments when it has occurred in the preceding sections, this time, the poet does not seem to be adopting a persona. Rather we appear to have Eliot offering himself as an example of the confused and decrepit state of the poetic tradition, a victim of the modernity he describes but also, at times, a lone link between it and the past it has begun to obliterate. This, inevitably, recalls us to the effects of the passage of time and thus the second Marvell allusion is unsurprising, though the nature of its continuation is rather less predictable.

But at my back from time to time I hear  
The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring  
Sweeney to Mrs Porter in the spring.  
O the moon shone bright on Mrs Porter  
And on her daughter  
They wash their feet in soda water  
*Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!*  
  
Twit twit twit  
Jug jug jug jug jug jug  
So rudely forc'd.

## Tereu (196-206)

The “winged chariot” of “To His Coy Mistress” is transmuted into the noisy blaring of a modern-day street, exchanging silent and subtle emphasis for vulgar commotion. With a thematic symmetry, the names of “Sweeney” and “Mrs Porter” are substituted for “Actaeon” and “Diana” and injected into the architecture of that iconic mythological encounter.<sup>253</sup> We know from Eliot’s two poems “Sweeney Erect” and “Sweeney among the Nightingales” that this man is depicted as a brutish, animalistic lout, “Letting his arms hang down to laugh, / the zebra stripes along his jaw / Swelling to maculate giraffe.” (2-4, “Sweeney among the Nightingales”). There is an ape-like, Neanderthal quality to his description, which harmonizes well with the fact that it is implied that Sweeney has, in some fashion, injured or offended the two women in the poem, and they are now preparing to exact revenge, “She and the lady in the cape / are suspect, thought to be in league;” (25-26).<sup>254</sup> The epigraph to the poem is also significant, since it is Agamemnon’s dying words in the eponymous play by Aeschylus, “Alas, I am struck deep with a mortal blow.”<sup>255</sup> Agamemnon has just been stabbed by his wife, Clytemnestra, who is belatedly exacting vengeance for his sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia, which he permitted ten years previously in order to gain fair winds for the Grecian ships that were attempting to depart for the Trojan War.<sup>256</sup>

Eliot is again reminding us that what the modern world has to offer is a banal,

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<sup>253</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 12, note 6.

<sup>254</sup> T.S Eliot. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber, 2002.

<sup>255</sup> T.S Eliot. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber, 2002.

<sup>256</sup> Aeschylus. *The Orestia*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Books, 1979.

unromantic alternative to a more elevated, mythological precursor, whose shame and brutality has at least been irradiated by poetry, and has been rendered less palpably repugnant by the passage of time. This is not to say that Eliot pardons the mythological precursors. Indeed, the nightingale reference suggests a similarity between Sweeney and the barbarous Tereus and, by extension, Agamemnon. However he is, perhaps, demonstrating that, in our current epoch, such individuals have become both less pardonable and more quietly epidemic, and that profusion has, as ever, muted our emotional response to the obscene.

The enigmatic figure of Mrs Porter is likewise suffused with literary allusions. First we appear to have her cast in the role of a modern day Artemis, approached by a loutish Actaeon, while indulging in a form of bathing.<sup>257</sup> However, the reference to moonlight, and inclusion of her daughter in the image, summons the image of Bathsheba being observed by the lustful King David.<sup>258</sup> There is also a biblical irony in the specification of foot-washing, since this was an act we are told Jesus performed on his twelve disciples prior to the Last Supper.<sup>259</sup> It was a ritual intended to denote profound humbleness and to exemplify the self-effacing modesty of the character of the Messiah. Likewise, the character of Parsifal in Verlaine's poem is said to receive a "ritual footbath" after overcoming the various challenges of the poem, among them the resisting of "female flesh",

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<sup>257</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 12, note 6.

<sup>258</sup> 2 Samuel 11, *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. New York: Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1959.

<sup>259</sup> John 13, *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. New York: Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1959.

prior to being permitted a sighting of the Holy Grail.<sup>260</sup> In *The Waste Land*, however, we have the act performed by two women upon themselves in a scenario awash with sexual allusions and rendered decadent to the point of absurd by the specification of “soda water”. This profligacy and self-regard in the performance of an act traditionally associated with modesty, and symbolic of spiritual cleanliness, is presumably intended to indicate a decline in the religious morality of the age, and a substitution of the simple and the sacred for the indulgent and profane. It is further interesting to consider that on this second occasion that we are confronted with water it is also possessed of a man-made quality and has been, in some sense, reconfigured from its natural state. At this stage in his life, Eliot’s attitude to religion still appears to have been exploratory, as exemplified by his forays in Buddhism at Harvard, from which this section of the poem derives its title. But the process of exploration suggests in itself a search for resolution of the kind that he presumably felt himself to have located by the time of his conversion in 1927.<sup>261</sup>

At the time of *The Waste Land*, however, he appears to have a keen sensitivity to the blasphemous and the irreverent even if he has not yet determined in what particular court of condemnation they should be judged, although an emphasis on the Judeo-Christian tradition is increasingly recognizable. With that in mind, the image of the foot-washing is a fertile one since, as mentioned, it was

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<sup>260</sup>T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 12, note 7.

<sup>261</sup>Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 81.



an act performed by Jesus upon *all* his disciples, including the one who was imminently to betray him, Judas.<sup>262</sup> It is worth noting that the self-subjugating act of foot-washing carries with it the suggestion of a betrayal to come. Likewise the image of Bathsheba bathing on the roof is the prelude to the betrayal by David of her then husband, Uriah the Hittite, whom the king ordered in his letter to Joab should be placed “in the front line of the fiercest battle” in the hope of ensuring his death and acquiring his wife.<sup>263</sup> Likewise we have the figures of Sweeney, Mrs Porter and her daughter, all of whom seem to have either perpetrated a betrayal of some sort, or are preparing to so do. The point of identity appears to be that all forms of love are, Eliot is suggesting, destined to be betrayed and corrupted, be it through the sexual, the mercantile or some combination of the two. There is no purity or oneness to be found, only self-regard and disunity in what ought to be exemplified by selflessness and unification. The sense of disgust that seems to radiate from Eliot’s half-dismissive, half-damning allusions to the sexual and romantic is entrenched by the positioning of the line “*Et O ces voix d’enfants, chantant dans la coupole!*” in between what we have just considered and the resurfacing “Jug(s)” of the Philomel-nightingale.<sup>264</sup> This image of infant voices raised in chorus to fill up the void seems, in light of the geography of the poem, emblematic of the futility of innocence. For Eliot, sex seems to be either vulgar or

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<sup>262</sup> John 13, *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. New York: Collins’ Clear-Type Press, 1959.

<sup>263</sup> 2 Samuel 15, *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. New York: Collins’ Clear-Type Press, 1959.

<sup>264</sup> “And oh those children’s voices singing in the dome!” (T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.p. 12, note 7).

savage and to carry with it always an element of the un-chosen, be it in the initiation or the aftermath (a thought that may be less lacking in foundation than we might wish). It is as though the poet intends us to feel that all male/female sexual relationships must be infused with some form of treachery, be it against the beloved or, worse perhaps, the self. I am reminded of Oscar Wilde's haunting lines in his 1898 *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, although it is not an allusion I make in an effort to entrench the suggestion of a homoerotic component to this portion of *The Waste Land*.

Yet each man kills the thing he loves

By each let this be heard,

Some do it with a bitter look,

Some with a flattering word,

The coward does it with a kiss,

The brave man with a sword!

Some kill their love when they are young,

And some when they are old;

Some strangle with the hands of Lust,

Some with the hands of Gold:

The kindest use a knife, because

The dead so soon grow cold.

Some love too little, some too long,  
Some sell, and others buy;  
Some do the deed with many tears,  
And some without a sigh:  
For each man kills the thing he loves,  
Yet each man does not die. (37-54)<sup>265</sup>

The lack of space for a reprieve, or alternative to this impermeable formula, seems equally present in the many and varied sexual-romantic scenarios that Eliot presents us with in *The Waste Land* and it is thought-provoking to see that they all begin, end or exist with a fundamental lack of communication, in the form of either an inability or unwillingness to listen or speak. The notion of the death of innocence present in the children's raised voices seems also to be apparent in the use of the vocative of Tereus ("Tereu"), as though Philomel were attempting to cry out to her violator. The story of Philomel being already familiar to us, we know that she is destined to receive no answer, and the silence that hangs in the air seems, symbolically, to infiltrate the dome where the voices of the incorrupt rebound hopelessly off an equally unresponsive surface. As Seamus Perry observes, "What might have seemed the natural beauty of birdsong, innocent as the children in Parsifal's cupola, is now ghosted by a sexual violence that we might not have suspected once but cannot now entirely forget: 'After such

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<sup>265</sup> Oscar Wilde. *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*. London: Wordsworth editions, 2007.

knowledge,’ as Eliot wrote elsewhere, ’what forgiveness?’”<sup>266</sup> Once again we find that the natural world has been corrupted in a fashion that seems to fracture its formerly fecund and inspirational relationship with poetry. And yet one might argue that it has continued to fulfil that role in its post-virginal condition. Though withered, parched, corrupted and infiltrated, nature has been a constant throughout *The Waste Land*, generating language and substantiating theme with no less consistency, though perhaps less grandiosity, than what we recollect in Shelley. Its face and voice are largely unrecognizable but its presence is so elemental to the poem that we need look no farther than the title to locate it.

At this juncture we seem to find ourselves returned to Eliot’s contemporary London but removed from one of the few instances where we appear to have been exposed to his own voice, unmodified by a persona:

Unreal City  
Under the brown fog of a winter noon  
Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant  
Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants  
C.i.f. London: documents at sight,  
Asked me in demotic French  
To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel  
Followed by a weekend at the Metropole. (207-214)

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<sup>266</sup>Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 85.

Here we have an utterly unromantic, even nauseatingly gauche example of a mercantile man's equally mercantile attempt to achieve sexual satisfaction. Everything about the scenario is grubby and without allure, from the inadequate French (a bleak and banal attempt to robe the self-serving and carnal in romance) to the tradesman's hotel and the kind of seaside resort that, in Evelyn Waugh's 1930's novel *A Handful of Dust* served as the location for the manufacturing of divorce evidence.<sup>267</sup><sup>268</sup> The formulaic and contractual nature of the suggestion, coupled with the unembellished manner in which the speaker narrates it to us, makes this the most unemotional example of modern day coupling that we have yet encountered in the poem. The fact of Mr Eugenides being a merchant also recalls us to Madame Sosostriis and the "blank" card that represents "something [the one-eyed merchant] carries on his back". The blankness of the card, rather than obscuring what the man carts, snail-like, around with him could be said to reveal it. It may be Eliot is suggesting that, for such men, their burden is that they are incapable of the complexity required for subterfuge, so emptied of thought and feeling are they. The most they can offer is a cursory nod to the vague knowledge that they are missing something obscure and essential, which they laughably attempt to mimic the existence of through the "demotic French" or the "pocket full of currents", as though this victim had already undergone her nightingale

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<sup>267</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.p. 12, note 3.

<sup>268</sup> Waugh's choice of locale in his novel might, like his title, have been a nod to Eliot, a fellow Catholic, and *The Waste Land*, although Brighton hotels were also traditionally used for the gathering of divorce evidence. (Evelyn Waugh. *A Handful of Dust*. New York: Penguin books, 2000).

metamorphosis. I have switched to the plural “they” here because the “Unreal city” recalls us to the Baudelaire original, and the multiplying old men (in whose place we now have multiplying merchants). An authentic love story would after all, require communion between two defined individuals and thus Eliot quite deliberately offers us only an unidentified female voice and a multitude of interchangeable males.

It is worth recalling that this section of *The Waste Land* was originally immediately preceded by series of heroic couplets on the subject of an intellectually vain and vacant woman called Fresca who was, “baptized in soapy seas”.<sup>269</sup> The corrupt seashore of Brighton seems to carry sufficient pollution with it, however, and allows to remain implied all the feminine inadequacies that were so vociferously overstated in the section that was removed, as well as sparing us from a misguided attempt to satirize a truly great satirist. As Pound himself affirmed, “Pope has done this so well that you cannot do it better; and if you mean this as a burlesque, you had better suppress it, for you cannot parody Pope unless you can write better verse than Pope – and you can’t.”<sup>270</sup> Thus, instead of a more vicious parody of *The Rape of the Lock*, Eliot offers us another contraction of a classical romance. It is no accident that the merchant’s name should be a Greek one, since it educes recollections of how far we have strayed from the great

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<sup>269</sup> T.S Eliot, Ezra Pound and Valerie Eliot. *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971. p. 41.

<sup>270</sup> Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 87.

romances depicted in Homer and Virgil.<sup>271</sup> These are our modern day amorous adventures, a clandestine lunch in Cannon Street and an off-season trip to a seaside resort, “Under the brown fog of a winter noon”. The more laconic compromise also seems in better keeping with the theme of partial, fractured links with our poetic past and the notion of being hurried forward by a horror of the realization that the way back is barred to us. Certainly we know that the language of *The Waste Land* allows for repetition, but it is a repetition achieved by the “wheel” rolling forward, not grinding backwards.<sup>272</sup>

This Grecian theme is sustained into the next section with the introduction of the presiding figure of Tiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes. There is a deistic quality to this “spectator” – as Perry so correctly terms him - made the more possible by his capacity for universal empathy (having been both man and woman), as well as his gift of foresight, which condemns him to know and feel all that is to come, as well as all that has already come to pass.<sup>273</sup> It may be that Eliot is deliberately skirting the peripheries of the idea that the concept of deism is only rescued from barbarousness if the un-intervening observer suffers to the same, or greater, degree than the observed.

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back

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<sup>272</sup> “London, your people is bound upon a wheel!” Eliot deleted the line in the original draft but a sense of its movement seems to remain, the more potently, perhaps, for being unstated. (T.S Eliot, Ezra Pound and Valerie Eliot. *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971. p. 43).

<sup>273</sup> Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 88.

Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits  
 Like a taxi throbbing waiting,  
 I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
 Old man with wrinkles female breasts, can see  
 At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
 Homeward, and bring the sailor home from sea,  
 The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights  
 Her stove, and lays out food tins.  
 Out of the window perilously spread  
 Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,  
 On the divan are piled (at night her bed)  
 Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays. (215-227)

To begin with the twice-occurring “violet hour”, Perry suggests that, “our inner-ears have been sensitized by the description of Philomela’s ‘inviolable voice’, with a glancing pun on ‘violate’.”<sup>274</sup> There is also the acknowledged Sappho allusion from “Fragment 149”, a prayer to the Evening Star, that Eliot mentions in his own notes but, perhaps more saliently, we have the ghostly and recurring presence of a quotation from Sappho 13, “As a hyacinth in the mountains that men shepherding / tread underfoot, and to the ground its flower, all purple.”<sup>275276</sup> This description by

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<sup>274</sup> Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 89

<sup>275</sup> Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 89.



Sappho of the loss of female virginity, and its synonymy to the bleeding purple of the hyacinth flower, has been with Eliot since “The Burial of the Dead” and seems to strangely find its resolution here. Suddenly the line, “In the mountains there you feel free” (17), takes on an ironic twist and the “hyacinth girl” becomes a harbinger of the fate of so many of the other women of *The Waste Land*. Thus the thickening “violet” of the “evening hour”, beautiful as it may seem, comes to suggest a means of obscuring wrong-doing, and the sense of something having been lurking in the shadows from the very beginning of the poem suddenly makes the more aggressive pun of “violent hour” seem not unmerited.

The allusion to the sailor coming “home from sea” also, in light of the oncoming part IV of the poem, “Death by Water”, carries with it a sense of foreboding but, because of the Greek flavour of the preceding line it seems not unreasonable to turn our minds momentarily towards the figure of Odysseus, that original returning sailor of epic poetry. Coming on the heels, as it does, of the theme of sexual-romantic betrayal we cannot but recollect his myriad infidelities against his faithful wife Penelope and the opaque premonition of sexual wrong-doing to come begins to gain more definition.<sup>277</sup> So we arrive at what modern day vernacular might designate the “date-rape” section of *The Waste Land*. This is undoubtedly a sinister and problematic term, suggestive of some degree of victim culpability and diminished responsibility on the part of the attacker, but in this

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<sup>276</sup> Sappho. *The Collected poems of Sappho*. Trans. Willis Barnstone. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2009.

<sup>277</sup> Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Group, 2006.

instance it is merely intended to denote foreknowledge of the imminent arrival of the aggressor.

The first thing to be said is that the scene is pitiful in its meagre domestic arrangements, which offer a very deliberate insight into the stunted and muted existence of the young woman. The food in “tins”, the drying laundry and erotically-evacuated undergarments (whatever whiff of sexuality they might have had is ruined by Tiresias’s “wrinkled dugs” (228) in the immediately following line) all serve to show us how far we are from Cleopatra’s golden barge and Dido’s shining city. Typist and Tiresias then mutually await “the expected guest” (230), a fact that seems to synthesize them and so prepare us for the prophet’s later, cryptic verdict on the universality of human wrong-doing and suffering.

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,  
A small house agent’s clerk, with one bold stare,  
One of the low on whom assurance sits  
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire. (231-234)

The description is pinched and diminutive in nature and suggestive of a narrowness of thought, as well as a scrofulous appearance, in the specification of a single “bold stare” and the idea that the clerk wears his confidence like the incongruous exterior signs of wealth upon a self-made manufacturing mogul.<sup>278</sup> Physicality, rather than humanity, is what serves to define him and it is this utter absence of any emotional dimension, beyond the purely (one might say

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<sup>278</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.p. 13, note 8.

‘impurely’) acquisitive, that serves to make him perhaps the most pathetically loathsome of the men we have so far encounter throughout the poem. Even the obscene brutality of Tereus seems suddenly faintly redeemed by virtue of its sheer emphasis, and its status as unassailably unique for that reason. Essentially, Eliot is helping us on our way to recognizing that there are many typists, and many house agents’ clerks partaking of tinned dinners beside divans in meagre flats all over modern London, and that the kind of violation we are about to see is not so much an aberration as a quietly corrosive condition of society, to such an extent that even the victim can barely muster the merited outrage.

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,  
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,  
Endeavours to engage her in caresses  
Which still are unreproved if undesired.  
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
Exploring hands encounter no defence;  
His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference. (235-242)

Eliot resorts here to something close to a regular rhyme scheme in iambic pentameter, as though to emphasize the squalid ingloriousness of modern romance and modern sexual violation by rendering a poetic form that is reminiscent of what was used as a vehicle for its more heightened precursors. What is most interesting to note, however, is the silent inertia of the female typist. At no point is she a

willing and active participant but neither is she actively attempting to extricate herself through either physical or verbal resistance. Indeed, her only mode of resistance could be said to lie in her passivity, which serves as an inexperienced deterrent to a man so animalistically single-minded as the clerk.

Bestows one final patronizing kiss,  
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit...

She turns and looks a moment in the glass  
Hardly aware of her departed lover;  
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:  
“Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.”  
When lovely woman stoops to folly and  
Paces about her room again, alone,  
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,  
And puts a record on the gramophone. (247-256)

The positioning of the ellipsis immediately after “unlit” is suggestive of a metastasizing darkness leading into the gap between it and the subsequent section. It is the fact of this white space upon the page that is, paradoxically, the most vocal testimony to the enormity of what has occurred, and the altered condition of the present in light of it. The more uncomfortable subtext of the ellipsis may also be felt; that such things will occur *ad infinitum*. The employment of the word “lover” to describe the perpetrator of this uniquely hideous charade of intimacy –

though contemporary vernacular would have designated him such – seems all that is required to make any complexity of thought possible. Instead, the typist takes refuge in a ghastly pragmatism, as though virginity (and in light of the Sappho lines, I think, we may assume it was that) was an encumbrance of the feminine condition; a burden to be divested and hastily forgotten. That she should, after her prolonged silence, speak those lines, however, is arresting, as though sound is required to eclipse the gap between her past and present self. This notion gives rise to the paradox already touched upon through the lovers' one-sided conversation in "A Game of Chess"; that speech may be a means of suppressing thought. And yet the decision neither to speak nor to think in terms of violation does, Eliot seems also to suggest, corrode the capacity for an understanding of it. Something essential is now missing, not the fact of virginity, but the authentic selfhood of choice and action that the loss of virginity may have a role to play in the crystallization of. It is not everything, but it is not nothing and, as we saw with Browning, the self-abdication of inaction is something even poetry struggles to repair.

When lovely woman stoops to folly and  
Paces about her room again, alone,  
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,  
And puts a record on the gramophone. (253-256)

It is the word “automatic” that strikes a chord here, implicative as it is of robotic movement and apparently unconscious activity. The Goldsmith original, in contrast, calls for the most definitive response possible:

When lovely woman stoops to folly,  
And finds too late that men betray  
What charm can sooth her melancholy,  
What art can wash her guilt away?

The only art her guilt to cover,  
To hide her shame from every eye,  
To give repentance to her lover  
And wring his bosom, is - to die. (1-8)<sup>279</sup>

There is a piercing irony in the recurrence of the word “lover” as well as the allusions to “charm” and “art”, so conspicuously free of both is the typist’s existence. More interesting, however, is the presumption of “melancholy” and “guilt”, both of which seem to be too potent in nature to be located in this woman’s vacant responses and vacated movements. Indeed, she appears as unaware of shame as she is of everything else. It is as though the refusal to act to prevent the *wrong* kind of experience has had a similar effect upon her to what we witnessed in Browning’s poetic characters when they failed to actively pursue the *right* kind. There is no building of identity in either scenario, only a great and

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<sup>279</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.p. 57.

pitiable nothingness where possibility once waited. It is also nastily humorous to ponder how incongruous Goldsmith's proscription would be were it applied in the world of *The Waste Land*. Far from a wrung "bosom" the impression we have gained of this "lover" is that he might experience a mild sense of annoyance (akin to being given the wrong change in a shop) at having been cheated of a handful of future chances at gratification. More positively, at least, the sinister sting of the suggestion of death becoming an "art" in such circumstances has had some of the venom drawn from it. Anything farther from art would be hard to comprehend and a woman whose one solace, after the absolute abdication of selfhood, is the fact of having simultaneously shed her virginity would make for a disorienting tragic heroine. So from where then does the haunting pathos of the lines emanate if not from the typist's melancholy? Perhaps, it may be said to stem precisely from her inability to feel or speak of melancholy. With Philomel we saw metamorphosis forged out of the highest pitch of agony; with the typist, we see the vacuum-effect engendered by the lowest depth of misery, a despair so isolated and profound that it cannot be felt, recognized, or articulated. Through this she becomes an emblem of the modern world that Eliot exhibits to us, a place so petrified and inert it cannot authentically experience and give voice to its own pain. Perry writes:

Much of the pity lies in the devastating placement of those commas in 1.254 and the weight they throw on the isolated word, "alone" – an emphasis which brings into play the word's other appearance, in a different context of sexual predation:

“Well if Albert won’t leave you alone, there it is, I said”. “[S]o all the women are one woman”, Eliot’s note advises.<sup>280</sup>

If “[m]uch of the pity” does indeed stem from this then perhaps the rest might be said to be generated by the absolute absence of self-knowledge, for what could be more pitiable than an inability to identify, feel or address the condition that has made existence lifeless? The fact of “all the women” being “one” has already been suggested to us through the “violet hour” clue to the Sappho 13 line but the larger point we may infer is that, since these women also serve as the emotional barometer of *The Waste Land*, we have indeed found ourselves in a universe that is losing its use for coherent and conscious language. Why so much of this should be, symbolically, placed upon the already sufficiently burdened shoulders of the females of the poem may seem faintly one-sided but is well explained by Eliot himself in a letter regarding the nature of his first marriage, “I came to persuade myself that I was in love with Vivienne simply because I wanted to burn my boats and commit myself to staying in England. And she persuaded herself (also under the influence of [Ezra] Pound) that she would save the poet by keeping him in England. To her, the marriage brought no happiness. To me, it brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*.”<sup>281</sup> By way of a half-nod back towards the question of poetic influence and impetus, it may be worth noting that, however

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<sup>280</sup> Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 92.

<sup>281</sup> T.S. Eliot, Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden. *The Letters of T. S. Eliot Volume 4: 1928-1929*. London: Faber & Faber. 2013.



much Eliot intended *The Waste Land* to be a realization of “the really new” work of art”, disappointment in the opposite sex would struggle to substantiate a case for originality in the making of poetry.

Before moving on to the final segment of ‘The Fire Sermon’ the bracketed allusion to Tiresias must also be considered:

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
Enacted on this same divan or bed;  
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
And walked among the lowest of the dead.) (243-246)

The choice of punctuation serves to encase Tiresias in that moment and, by extension all moments, in a manner that, as suggested, cannot help but appear symbolic of the architecture of deism. True to the concept, he neither speaks nor intervenes, and yet he appears to suffer, and to be aware of the typist’s suffering, far more tangibly and poignantly than she is herself. But for all his deistic symmetry Tiresias’s silent observation is not godlike, since we know him to be several degrees removed from the entities who bestowed on him the gift of foresight in compensation for the physical blindness that was also inflicted by one of their number.<sup>282</sup> Tiresias is impelled, by virtue of his prophetic capacity and dual-gender experience, to emotionally navigate every moment that unfolds in the narrative of humanity. His condition can, therefore, be viewed as a kind of enforced deism through which he must suffer all things while remaining unable to

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<sup>282</sup>T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 46.

correct a single injustice, or address any participant individual. He is the silent watcher of the poem, a condition into which we never achieve more insight than through the spasm of anguish that suffuses this unembellished statement of his lot.

The notion of a deistic stand-in, however, necessarily turns the mind towards the question of the real Gods of *The Waste Land* – among them the gods who fashioned Tiresias's fate - and where, if anywhere, they can be located? It is a thought to keep in mind as the music of the typist's gramophone moves us on towards a possible response to the question, not conjuring ghostly images in quite the fashion of the music in Browning's "A Toccata of Galuppi's", but offering a momentum that seems to almost synchronize with the current of the Thames.

“This music crept by me upon the waters”  
And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.  
O City, City, I can sometimes hear  
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,  
The pleasant whining of a mandolin  
And a clatter and a chatter from within  
Where fishermen lounge at noon: where the walls  
Of Magnus Martyr hold  
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.  
  
The river sweats  
Oil and tar

The barges drift  
With the turning tide  
Red sails  
Wide  
To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.  
The barges wash  
Drifting logs  
Down Greenwich reach  
Past the Isle of Dogs. (257-276)

Water and music propel us through the city, swiftly traversing the final vignette of “The Burial of the Dead” with the “O City, City”, and also a “public bar”, of the sort where Lil’s strident friend would be no doubt be making her presence felt. But the “clatter and [the] chatter” are short-lived and we quickly find ourselves at the “Inexplicable splendour” of the first Christian church we have yet encountered in the poem. Perry describes this “inexplicability” as being “like the incommunicability experienced in the hyacinth garden, poised undecidedly between something wondrously inexpressible and something that’s just bewildering.”<sup>283</sup> In light of what we learned from Sappho 13, however, the hyacinth garden has come to seem emblematic of a silence and paralysis that constitutes a premonition of all the feminine suffering throughout the poem. The

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<sup>283</sup>Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. pp. 92-93.

“silence” (41) itself appears to emanate from the emotional vacuum where only the fore-suffering and all-suffering Tiresias may reside, just as the “Inexplicable splendour” of the church may be that unknown territory between the fierceness and futility of martyrdom, death as an the “art” that Goldsmith spoke of, and death simply as an ending. The “fishmen” who “lounge” also recall us to the disciples who left their nets and other worldly possessions to follow Jesus and the dichotomy between the temporal and the spiritual existence, which is emblematic of the abyss between god and humanity.<sup>284</sup> The gap between these two segments of the poem allows the silence to resonate long enough to be felt if not, perhaps, wholly understood. The nomenclature of “The Fire Sermon” also reasserts itself here, since Magnus Martyr was a church that had to be rebuilt after the Great Fire of London.<sup>285</sup> It is a circumstance that Eliot employs to emphasize the destructive quality of the kind of corporeal appetites that we saw in Tereus and the house agent’s clerk, and the annihilating effect such things have upon language, feeling and spirituality.

At this point in the poem we begin to see a rising taciturnity that comes, somewhat ironically, just as we finally find ourselves in the presence of real, living water. However, the near personification of “sweats / Oil and tar” shows it to be also corrupted by the man-made element. Furthermore, Eliot chooses to populate the Thames with the mysteriously displaced Rhinemaidens, who seem to

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<sup>284</sup> Mark 1:17. *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. New York: Collins’ Clear-Type Press, 1959.

<sup>285</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 14.

have transported with them all their sense of depravation, while also acquiring a London-specific devastation of sexual innocence.

Weialala leia

Wallala leialala

Elizabeth and Leicester

Beating oars

The stern was formed

A gilded shell

Red and gold

The brisk swell

Rippled both shores

Southwest wind

Carried down stream

The peal of bells

White towers

Weialala leia

Wallala leialala (277-291)

This lament of the three Rhinemaidens over the loss of the Rheingold is, Wagner affirmed in a letter to Nietzsche in 1876, a derivation of the old German

“Weihwasser”, which translates to “holy water”.<sup>286</sup> The earlier description of the “Ionian white and gold” in “Magnus Martyr” already serves as a point of identity, and thus the allusion to “holy water” causes the nymphs to seem something approaching a parodic feminine trinity, but a trinity wholly stripped of purity and mystery and garbed instead in the toneless realism of a quintessential fallen woman of London:

Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew  
Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees  
Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe.”

“My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart  
Under my feet. After the event  
He wept. (292-299)

These are not even the departed nymphs - former “friends” of the “heirs of city directors” - that we saw at the beginning of “The Fire Sermon”. Now they are saturated by the atrophic pragmatism that we previously witnessed in the typist and the use of the term “Undid” suddenly seems to carry with it an unprecedented level of recalibration. Eliot is exhibiting a trinity of the beautiful and unspoiled figures of mythology, articulating themselves with the un-romanticized realism of London street-walkers. It is as though the poet intends to indicate that such things

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<sup>286</sup> Stewart Spencer. “The language and sources of the Ring”. *Wagner: The Rhinegold/Das Rheingold*. English National Opera Guides 35. London: John Calder (Publishers) Ltd, 1985. pp. 31–38.

as feminine mystique, and the essence of Christianity, cannot flourish in the landscape of modernity and neither, as we see once again, can any kind of authentic romantic love. Instead we have “Elizabeth and Leicester” vainly playing at a frivolous, insincere courtship, “a gilded shell” of Cleopatra’s golden pilgrimage up the River Cydnus to Anthony. It seems inevitable that the Rheingold should have vanished from these transposed and transmuted guardian nymphs of the River Thames, since nowhere in the London of *The Waste Land* have we found anyone who does not, like Alberich, abjure love, even if only for want of recognizing what it truly constitutes.<sup>287</sup> The muddled rearrangement of the old German original is perfect for Eliot’s purposes here. These figures of Norse mythology, so displaced and incongruous in this modern environment, can only communicate in confused derivations, or the evacuated simplicity of the vernacular of the day. Whichever angle we approach it from, the essential point is that they are speaking a mutated and alien language. This sense of entities occupying a space and employing language that is not organic to them seems to have been with us since the “Hyacinth girl” in “The Burial of the Dead”, and is also fiercely noticeable in “A Game of Chess”, which also contains our first encounter with the motif of gold interacting with water. It would seem that Eliot perennially wishes to confront us with the simultaneous image of the man-made and the natural, which, presumably, is why the water of *The Waste Land* is never

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<sup>287</sup> Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 94.

quite permitted to remain untainted. We may have the ornamental eclipsing the authentic, or the ancient and the mysterious transformed into the modern and explicit, but we may never have purity, or authenticity, or anything as it was intended to be while we inhabit the world modernity has engendered.

This, inevitably, participates with the theme of displacement and recalls us to the *The Tempest* allusion, which the typist's gramophone music merges us into, "This music crept by me upon the waters" (257). Like the Rhinemaidens of the *The Waste Land*, Ferdinand in *The Tempest* has undergone an aquatic relocation and now finds himself on foreign shores, beguiled by the spirit Ariel's music:

Where should this music be? I' th' air or th' earth?

It sounds no more, and sure, it waits upon

Some god o' th' island. Sitting on a bank,

Weeping again the king my father's wrack,

This music crept by me upon the waters,

Allaying both their fury and my passion

With its sweet air. Thence I have followed it,

Or it hath drawn me rather. But 'tis gone.

No, it begins again. (Act I, scene ii)<sup>288</sup>

The two preceding allusions to Ariel's song (lines 48 and 125) make this another motif that thematically interlocks the different sections of the poem and the

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<sup>288</sup> William Shakespeare. *The Tempest*. Ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan. London: Arden Shakespeare, 1999.



invocation of this particular speech serves not only to harmonize with the condition of the Rhinemaidens but also to recall us to the passionless state advocated by the Buddha's "Fire Sermon", "Allaying both their fury and my passion". Again we have fragmented allusions to literary history, combined with a sense of the emotionally voided condition of modernity. One might argue that there is an incongruity in the fact of Eliot invoking the "Fire Sermon" in an almost prescriptive fashion – as a mode of obtaining spiritual purity – when so much implied disapproval is lavished upon the vacated condition of the figures of *The Waste Land*. Presumably, the intention is to highlight the distinction between those drained, disordered figures and the idea of attaining a condition of spiritual elevation through a conscious shedding of all that detracts from our un-disfigured souls. Only through such an impetus can a condition of enlightenment be achieved, whereas the emotional confusion, vacancy and vacuity of "The Fire Sermon" of *The Waste Land* appears to be the product of entirely human and superficial appetites. Indeed, the decision to reference this speech of Ferdinand's seems meant, by extension, to call our attention to a later speech from Caliban in *The Tempest*.

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,  
Sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,

Will make me sleep again. And then, in dreaming,  
The clouds methought would open and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked  
I cried to dream again. (Act III, scene ii)<sup>289</sup>

This earlier allusion to an acquisitive impulse so strong as to eclipse the desire for reality seems to be part of the labyrinth of allusion through which Eliot indicts modernity. Many of the figures of *The Waste Land* do not even have the excuse of Caliban's isolation and ignorance for the ugliness of their desires and mode of existence; rather they are symptoms of an irredeemable condition that they also serve to perpetuate.<sup>290</sup> And yet there have been vague hints at a possible redemption throughout "The Fire Sermon", beginning with the suggestion of a deistic stand-in the figure of Tiresias, and arriving at the subsequent series of Christian imagery and allusion that is entrenched by the suggestion in Ferdinand's speech that the music he hears, "waits upon / Some god o' th' island." However, this is also the point at which the poem, more so than at any previous stage, seems to linguistically start to break down.

He promised 'a new start.'

I made no comment. What should I resent?"

"On Margate Sands.

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<sup>289</sup> William Shakespeare. *The Tempest*. Ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan. London: Arden Shakespeare, 1999.

<sup>290</sup> This is a thought reminiscent of the protagonist of John Fowles's 1963 novel, *The Collector*. The narrator, whose real name is Frederick, styles himself as "Ferdinand" in an effort to appear more suited to the woman with whom he is infatuated, "Miranda". (John Fowles. *The Collector*. London: Random House, 2004).

I can connect  
Nothing with nothing  
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.  
My people humble people who expect  
Nothing.”

la la

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning  
O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
O Lord Thou pluckest

burning (299-311)

Again we have the eloquence of the unanswered question that indicates an array of hopeless possibilities, neither particularly more or less deserving of resentment than the other. What is clear is that the material required for the “new start” is not in existence and consequently the offer can be greeted only by silence. Intrinsic to this is also the suggestion that the speaker is not equipped to proffer what he suggests, causing the gaping untruth of the promise to reverberate beneath the silence of the listener. There is a strong suggestion that the emotional and spiritual foundations are not stable enough to be built on, “I can connect / Nothing with

nothing” and that all the potential architects of a new condition are too “broken” and sullied to be of use. There is the flicker of the possibility of a sudden, divine reprieve in the allusion to St Augustine’s “Confessions”, “To Carthage then I came” but it is immediately consumed by the quadruple “burning” and the fragmented, unfinished “O Lord Thou pluckest me out”, a quotation in which the “O” appears as cavernous as did the “O” of the Shakespearian Rag in “A Game of Chess”.<sup>291</sup> Ultimately, the flickering and fragmented hints at a possible improvement seem to have been nothing more than a collage of memories out of which no gods are emerging to salvage the figures of “The Fire Sermon”, or poem at large. In light of the thematic conflation of Carthage with Alexandria (through the classical romantic heroines of both) it is, however, interesting to note some imagery crossover between these concluding sections of “The Fire Sermon” and the 1911 poem by Greek writer Constantinos P. Cavafy, “The God Abandons Antony”:

When suddenly, at midnight, you hear  
  
an invisible procession going by  
  
with exquisite music, voices,  
  
don't mourn your luck that's failing now,  
  
work gone wrong, your plans

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<sup>291</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 58.

all proving deceptive - don't mourn them uselessly:

as one long prepared, and full of courage,

say goodbye to her, to Alexandria who is leaving.

Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say

it was a dream, your ears deceived you:

don't degrade yourself with empty hopes like these.

As one long prepared, and full of courage,

as is right for you who were given this kind of city,

go firmly to the window

and listen with deep emotion,

but not with the whining, the pleas of a coward;

listen - your final pleasure - to the voices,

to the exquisite music of that strange procession,

and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.

(1-19)<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*. Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Ed. George Savidis. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Here also we have music as a herald of the abandonment of the gods and onset of irreparable loss that seems, symbolically, to extend to a larger societal breakdown. Cleopatra and Antony, after all, permitted continents and the evolution of history to remain secondary to the pursuit of their mutual passion, a flourish few other romances could claim. There is a kind of converse symmetry to the juxtaposition of the idea of love overthrowing civilization, and physical love being abandoned for a more structured, theistic kind, as we see in “Confessions”:

I sank away from Thee, and I wandered, O my God, too much astray from Thee  
my stay, in these days of my youth, and I become to myself a barren land.

To Carthage, where there sand all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy  
loves. I loved not yet, yet I loved to love, and out of a deep-seated want, I hated  
myself for wanting not. I sought what I might love, in love with loving, and safety  
I hated, and a way without snares. For within me was a famine of that inward food.  
Thyself, my God;<sup>293</sup>

In whatever direction such emotional emphasis is turned, and however much either might be preferable to the endemic torpor of *The Waste Land*, what Eliot seems to be demonstrating is the extent to which neither is possible. Both love and God are equally incapable of redeeming and resuscitating the people of this landscape, something that has already been vicariously indicated through the nomenclature of

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<sup>293</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 58.

the opera in which the Rhinemaidens feature, “*Götterdämmerung*” (“The Twilight of the Gods”). Ultimately, the final “burning”, with its strangely disordered and diminutive lack of capitalization, carries with it all the destructive conflagration of the basest human impulses and the disintegration of a language that is no longer looked to for redemption.

\* \* \*

From fire to water, Eliot now takes us, and we find ourselves in part IV “Death by Water”. At last it is water that could be seen as uncorrupted, but it is also water that brings with it no more redemption or respite than the fire that came before it.

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,

Forgot the cry of the gulls, and the deep sea swell

And the profit and loss.

A current under the sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell

He passed the stages of his age and youth

Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,

Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

(312-321)

Though this water appears uncorrupted there is still an interloping human element to be found, albeit only in the form of organic decomposition. The molecular breakdown of Phlebus is less aesthetically rehabilitated than Ariel's song, "Full fathom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are coral made; / Those are pearls that were in his eyes; (Act I, scene ii).<sup>294</sup> The bones are not transmuted into 'coral' but rather it is implied they are "Picked" at, as well as picked *up*, by the swell of the current. But what is the objective behind this shortest section of *The Waste Land* that Pound claimed was "an integral part of the poem"?<sup>295</sup> It may be reasonable to contend that, if women function as the emotional barometer of *The Waste Land* than the water imagery is emblematic of the health and sustainability of society. As a universally life-giving element it is certainly uniquely suited for such a metaphor. The, "O you who turn upon the wheel and look to windward" recalls us to the earlier line that Eliot expunged one rendering of, and then inserted again a few lines later (this time encased in brackets), in the original draft of "The Fire Sermon", "(London, your people is bound upon the wheel!)"<sup>296</sup> As with the bracketed Tiresias section in "The Fire Sermon", the use of punctuation seems to indicate that the thought can be viewed as intrinsic to any moment. Once again we

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<sup>294</sup> William Shakespeare. *The Tempest*. Ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan. London: Arden Shakespeare, 1999.

<sup>295</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 16, note 5.

<sup>296</sup> T.S Eliot and Ezra Pound. *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971. p. 43.



also have the exclamation “O”, which suggests a hollowness on the part of the wheel-turner, a term that is presumably applicable to anyone attempting to navigate the human condition in this environment. The texture of the message that Eliot is trying to convey has the feel and fluidity of water; something that cannot be physically grasped but is nonetheless acutely present and essential. It seems that we are encouraged to carry on, but with a cognizance of potential catastrophe and an awareness that, without the knowledge of what aspects of our past have been mutilated by our present, humanity cannot hope to prosper or sustain. It is a thought that neatly captures the paradox of moving forward: the fact that progress requires intense retrospection. The word “Consider” consequently becomes the most arresting, since it places the emphasis on thought rather than action. It also conjures recollections of “The Sermon on the Mount”, “Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”<sup>297</sup> Essentially, Eliot seems to be suggesting that nothing can come out of the kind of development that seeks to deface and destroy the past that rendered it possible. Unthinking and appetite-driven action is not the answer, unless we wish to share Phlebas’s fate (the figure seems linked, through Ariel’s Song, with Ferdinand’s acquisitive and morally bankrupt parent, Antonio). It may be that there is a double entendre in the use of the word “Forgot”. On the one hand, it suggests participation in the condition of

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<sup>297</sup> Matthew 5-7. *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. New York: Collins’ Clear-Type Press, 1959.

his own death, a kind of anthropomorphized non-existence; on the other, it implies that forgetfulness may have had a hand in engendering it. Perry suggests that, “Consider Phlebus, who was once handsome and tall as you.” is reminiscent of “the sort of thing poets used to say” and, interactively, it is also an enjoinment to look to the past, perhaps specifically through language.<sup>298</sup> Certainly Eliot is not a reactionary in the literary sense, he is simply offering the thought that, though we cannot, and should not, return or replicate, we must also not forget. This is the sea-change required if the waters of modernity are to be purified and made able to generate, as well as to drown.

\* \* \*

Here, at last, as we come to part V, ‘What the Thunder Said’ we must first recollect the relationship between language and nature as it was characterized in Shelley’s *Mont Blanc*. This time, the role of nature is to be more interactive than evocative, and with a linguistic, rather than a purely sound-based, component. Before we arrive there, however, the theme of this, the final section of *The Waste Land*, is water, specifically, the lack of it.

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces

After the frosty silence in the gardens

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<sup>298</sup> Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 97.

After the agony in stony places

The shouting and the crying

Prison and palace and reverberation

Of thunder of spring over distant mountains

He who was living is now dead

We who were living are now dying

With a little patience

Here is no water but only rock

Rock and no water and the sandy road

The road winding above among the mountains

Which are mountains of rock without water

If there were water we should stop and drink

Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think (322-336)

It is a universally barren wasteland that Eliot shows us here. Barren of hope in the allusion to the un-resurrected messiah, “He who was living is now dead”, barren of sound, which has been replaced by an icily meaningful “silence” and, most of all, barren of water. There is nothing to sustain life but, far more than that, nothing to generate thought, “Amongst the rock one cannot stop to thing”. We are back in the “shadow of this red rock”(26), that Old Testament desert landscape, and yet in the aftermath of the crucifixion. Hope has come and gone again, leaving us

hopeless, thoughtless and languageless, so much so that even nature seems to have been bled dry, presumably in an effort to sustain the unsustainable. That this is a metaphor for the absence of inspiration, in particular the inspiration that poetry once looked to nature for, may not have been exactly the message was Eliot deliberately trying to convey, but it is one that has been ingested by the poem, “There is not even silence in the mountain / But dry sterile thunder without rain / There is not even solitude in the mountain (341-343). This is the reverse of Shelley’s resolution to *Mont Blanc*, “And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / if to the human mind’s imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy? (142-144). And yet it is this very paucity and sparseness that have given rise to *The Waste Land*. It is not quite the same as Yeats searching “in vain” for the theme until the search itself becomes his theme (“The Circus Animals’ Desertion”) but it is not wholly unlike that. It is about poetry generated by the fear of its own annihilation, modernism not only as a search for the “really new” but also, and concurrently, as a kind of poetic baby-boom. If everything is gone, after all, then there remains nothing but the raw, sore need to start again: “If there were water”. And yet the poem still does not seem to feel quite sure of its sustainability, insofar as it is acutely sure of everything that would have to change if sustenance were to become possible:

And no rock

If there were rock

And also water

And water

A spring

A pool among the rock

If there were the sound of water

Not the cicada

And dry grass singing

But the sound of water over a rock (347-358)

The search for sound is the thing, since sound reminds us of why language exists, and of everything before that has gone into the making of language. It is as if the voice of the poem is rushing and blundering in the hope of locating even the faintest sound, so that it may generate more sound and, finally, something more substantial than sound, but is not yet quite sure of an arrival point. It is a very a careful kind of rushing, and a blundering of profound beauty, like a mountain lion picking its way over a vertiginous, stony path, but the lack of any kind of punctuation is enough to indicate the momentum. Furthermore, Eliot seems acutely conscious that the wish to succeed renders one susceptible to a mirage, which is somewhat cruelly exhibited in the, “Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop” of the hermit thrush’s song. The quadruple “drop” is suggestive of an immediately lowering of spirit and diminishment of hope, “But there is no water” (358).

Who is the third who walks always beside you?

When I count, there are only you and I together

But when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
I do not know whether a man or a woman  
—But who is that on the other side of you?

What is that sound high in the air  
Murmur of maternal lamentation  
Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth  
Ringed by the flat horizon only  
What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal (359-376)

The allusion to Luke 24, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, seems to symbolize the extent to which Eliot still finds a potential solution to the moral and artistic drought, symbolized by the landscape, to be obscure. We cannot visualize our own resurrection. The gaping dash between, “I do now know whether you are man or a woman / - But who is that on the other side of you?” also seems to represent an abyss between male and female consciousness, a lack of harmony that,

as Eliot suggested, is symptomatic of his own disintegrated marriage. The silence of the two unanswered questions, particularly the one followed by the gap between the stanzas, is, as ever, eloquent of a need for language where none can be provided. The “Murmur of maternal lamentation” has the mournfulness of a parental gift offered and unrecognized, of the precursor trying to be heard “over the mountains” but registering only as a non-specific sound. We also find ourselves reminded of the crowds on London Bridge in “The Burial of the Dead” with the “hooded hordes swarming”, as though all portions of the poem were suddenly fusing into each other that the crowds, like the Rhinemaidens, have been transported to the “cracked earth” of part V and part I. Also returned is the hint of a forever hovering violence in the “violet air” and the “falling towers” of the cities most emblematic of civilization in the ancient and the modern worlds. The “Unreal” also resurrects itself from the fourth vignette of Part I, bringing with it the putridness of moral and spiritual decay. Eliot has summoned and conjoined all the unsavoury and sinister elements that suffused the earlier parts of the poem and brought them into collision because here, if anywhere, some kind of resolution of hope or hopelessness must be forged in the fires of thematic combustion.

A woman drew her long black hair out tight  
And fiddled whisper music on those strings  
And bats with baby faces in the violet light  
Whistled, and beat their wings  
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall

And upside down in air were towers  
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept, the hours  
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.

(337-384)

The sinister fusion of “bats with baby faces”, immediately followed by the “violet light”, returns us to the theme of metamorphosis, but this time the imagery is aesthetically corrupted and incomplete. Metamorphosis, instead of rehabilitating a moment of absolute desecration, is itself ruptured in a manner that entrenches the obscenity that made it seem initially desirable. It is an image that harmonizes strangely with the idea of human hair as violin strings; we may extract and rearrange aspects of a totality but such inadequate reformation can only produce a grotesque, fun-house alternative. I do not propose to suggest that Eliot specifically intended to convey the idea of a *human* “baby” face upon the body of a bat but it does seem likely that he meant the use of the word to evoke a sense of the misshapen and incongruous, of the innocence of youth coupled with the corruption of wizened, vampiric vermin. Most arresting, however, are the “reminiscent bells” and the past tense in the use of the word “kept”, which seems to suggest that not only people and places are fusing into shared and mutually incongruous space but time itself can no longer keep track of its contours and measurements. Once more too we have voices emanating from dried up and, very specifically, man-made locations for water. The implication is clear, that it is at humanity’s door that this rising lifelessness and loss of language is to be laid. By way of a momentary



digression it is interesting to note here that, read in a more literal fashion, much of *The Waste Land* happens to be prophetic of the environmental decline of the planet. While Eliot clearly wishes to draw attention to the aesthetic corruption of landscape and architecture, the larger and later concern of global warming could not have been on his mind, though it was to become a further symptom of what he is already bemoaning. It is a fact that lends the poem the extended significance of an inadvertent prescience.

In this decayed hole among the mountains  
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing  
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel  
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.  
It has no windows, and the door swings,  
Dry bones can harm no one.  
Only a cock stood on the rooftree  
Co co rico co co co  
In a flash of lightening. Then a damp gust  
Bringing rain

Ganga was sunken, and limp leaves  
Waited for rain, while the black clouds  
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.  
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.

Then spoke the thunder

DA (385-400)

The allusions both to nature and the more elevated examples of human architecture are consistently accompanied by adjectives indicative of diminishment, either through loss of sound or decline of physical solidity. The reference to the harmlessness of “Dry bones” seems heavily ironic. Certainly we are without the water-corrosion that we saw interacting with the remains of Phlebus but the fact of there being bones at all suggests the harm is already done. The crowing of the cock both evokes recollections of biblical treachery and reminds us of the impotent “Jug jug” (204) of Philomel and, as though in answer, the weather of the poem plays a trick on us by suddenly “Bringing rain” and, just as suddenly, transmuting us into a landscape where it is still “Waited” for. Then at last, as never yet seen in any of the poetry we have considered, the immensity of nature speaks out of the deformed silence of human degeneration, “DA”, and out of it emerges a series of potential interpretations that seem emblematic of the origins and development of religious schism.

*Datta*: what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract

By this, and this only, we have existed

Which is not to be found in our obituaries

Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider

Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor

In our empty rooms

DA

*Dayadhvam*: I have heard the key

Turn in the door once and once only

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours

Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus

DA

*Damyata*: The boat responded

Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar

The sea was calm, your heart would have responded

Gaily, when invited, beating obedient

To controlling hands (401-422)

This allusion to *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, where God presents three groups with the single prefix “DA” and challenges them to comprehend its meaning (whereupon they all hit on a distinct term that encapsulates a different principle) can be understood, perhaps especially in the context of *The Waste Land*, as a

parable for the formulation of varying religious denominations.<sup>299</sup> Harmony exists only insofar as all of the three conclusions are equally philosophically incomplete. First we have the unanswered “what have we given?”, followed by the bleak outline of what presumably stands as a prototype for the habitually unsatisfactory nature of human existence that ends, in truly human fashion, with the emphasis on mere emptiness rather than the natural world’s populated and sustaining solitude. Next we have a sense of being irrevocably entrapped, as well as what may well be intended as a pun on the word “prison” (the idea being that a “prism” disperses light haphazardly in different directions, without forming a reliable pattern or consensus). The final Shakespearean allusion of the poem, in the reference to “Coriolanus”, may contain the word “revive” but seems to offer little respite from the sense of doom and imprisonment emphasized in the immediately preceding Dante reference.<sup>300</sup> Perry writes: “The whole play pivots on Coriolanus’s silence, at once self-destructive and self-redemptive, which seems to have communicated with the silences in Eliot’s poem, places where language runs out, through lassitude (“Why do you never speak”) or indifference (“I made no comment”) or incapacity (“I could not / Speak”).<sup>301</sup> Certainly the silences of *The Waste Land* have all seemed to commune with each other throughout the poem, a circumstance

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<sup>299</sup> “ ‘damyata’ (control) for the gods, who are naturally unruly; ‘datta’ (give) to men, who are avaricious; ‘dayadhvam’ (compassion) to the demons, who are cruel.” (T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 18, note 3).

<sup>300</sup> An allusion to the imprisonment and starvation of Count Ugolino, Canto 33, the *Inferno*. (T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 19, note 6).

<sup>301</sup> Seamus Perry. *The Cornell Guide To T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: The Cornell Guides, 2014. p. 113.

that suggests they all emanate from a similar source. It is a notion that Coriolanus helps to crystalize: silences come in the wake of an abdication of selfhood, which, paradoxically, must always stem from a self-recognition profound enough to detect its own limits. It is also at such moments of crux that metamorphosis may play its part. A recalibration of self can be seen as a way to evade or mitigate the ultimate breaking point, but the reality is that only selfhood stretched like a violin string could be enough to generate it. That this pitch may be found in despair, apathy or inertia can be explained by a consideration of the simultaneous harmony and juxtaposition of the lowest depth of misery and the highest pitch of agony; a symptom of both being the loss of language.

Finally we have the idea of control and a sense of functionality that is belied by the conditional, “your heart would have responded” and the strange lack of resolution in the absence of a full-stop after “controlling hands”. The cumulative impression is that none of these interpretations, or modes of existence, constitute a solution in themselves. Something of the initial message has been lost in translation but the fact of the message having come from nature itself in the form of thunder, is the point of significance. The structure and aftermath of the moment bears a similarity to God’s self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 3:14, “I AM THAT I AM.”<sup>302</sup> Clearly the needed response is not to contort consciousness in an effort to untangle an apparent tautology, but rather to take it as an

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<sup>302</sup> Exodus 3:14. *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. New York: Collins’ Clear-Type Press, 1959.

unassailable affirmative from which everything subsequent emanates. Similarly, the word spoken by the thunder is phonetically identical to the Russian word for “yes”, although the Russian alphabet, of course, depicts the letter “D” differently. There is a strong inspirational significance to the fact of nature giving voice to itself in this final section of *The Waste Land*, especially in light of how conscious of Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* it has been shown to be, “There is not even silence in the mountains... / there is not even solitude in the mountains” (341,343). This is not God addressing mankind but the original fount of poetic inspiration addressing poetry itself, and apparently enjoining it to sustain. And yet the Tower of Babel effect that has been enacted upon this single affirmative troubles the hopefulness of the message. What is required seems to be a kind of ideological ecumenism that will revitalize the parched landscape of expression, but the resolution and prognosis of the poem remains a complex one:

I sat upon the shore

Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

Shall I at least set my lands in order?

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

*Poi s’aspose nel foco che gli affina*

*Quando fiam uti chelidon* – O swallow swallow

*Le Prince d’Aquitaine a la tour abolie*

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih      shantih      shantih

There is a messianic quality to the allusion to fishing that cannot help but remind us of the individual who styled himself a “fisher of men”.<sup>303</sup> The landscape “behind” the speaker is parched and emptied but there is at least water before them and the hope that something sustaining may be extracted from it. The allusion to setting one’s “lands in order” is biblical in origin but can be understood here as a metaphor for artistic continuation. Eliot seems to be musing upon the possible sustainability of poetry, and the possible construction of the kind of society that is able to beget poetry, but his resolution is, disconcertingly, the familiar unanswered question followed by an abyss-like gap that is only curtailed by a nursery rhyme of nihilistic content. This is poetry at its most puerile but carrying with it a sinister simplicity in the allusion to London Bridge, which recalls us to the “crowds” who relied upon it for elevation at the beginning of the poem. At this, the final resolution of *The Waste Land*, Eliot senses the spectres of disintegration and annihilation but the allusion to a body of water, and the agony of purifying fire in the italicized Dante quotation, leaves us some hope that it may not yet be time for

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<sup>303</sup> Matthew 4:19. *The Holy Bible*, Authorized King James Version. New York: Collins’ Clear-Type Press, 1959.

poetry to set its lands in order.<sup>304</sup> We are among the ruins of society and art but the fact of the poet writing “these fragments” has “shored” something up against the ruin of language and offered a glimpse of a more aerodynamic future, “When shall I be like the swallow?”<sup>305</sup> And yet we cannot escape the confusion of languages, terminology and reference that constitutes the end of *The Waste Land*, a fact that leaves us to conjecture that the closest Eliot has come to a solution is the recognition that one is required. There is even a sense of language cannibalizing itself in the meta-theatrical allusion to *The Spanish Tragedie* and the fear that every artistic forum may only serve as another vehicle for annihilation.<sup>306</sup> Still the poem remains perversely hopeful, despite the linguistic intersections, cavernous word placement and relentless enjambment, interspersed with moments of stark, bruising punctuation. To have found the means of writing *The Waste Land*, and to have called upon the hoard of literary riches that inflect and enliven its pages, Eliot must have at least entertained the suspicion that he would be heard and, perhaps even, listened to. There is no tidy solution to the problem of poetry amidst modernity, not even the decision to finally give voice to the voiceless natural world, since, like divine revelation, this too may find itself lost within a labyrinth of interpretation. We might say that Nature has been wiser than God when it comes to the question of verbal self-revelation, having allowed silence, not language, to lend it substance. All this Eliot illuminates for us through a poem that

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<sup>304</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 19, note 2.

<sup>305</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 19, note 3.

<sup>306</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p. 20, note 5.



handles silence with the reverence of an unassailable constant but also with the terror that the unassailable, necessarily, evokes. This is poetry fighting for itself, and also against itself. The closest we may come to a resolution to the many questions conjured by *The Waste Land* is the realization that it is through this conflict that poetry is generated and that this is the only means through which it may prove its right to exist, and summon what is required to sustain.

## Conclusion

The first thing to acknowledge, having arrived at the conclusion of this simultaneously distinct and correlated arc of poets and epochs, is that the final chapter on Eliot's *The Waste Land* has been more extensive than any of the preceding ones. This has nothing to do with the length or complexity of the poem itself, which is shorter in word-count than *Alastor* and *Adonais*, so much as the fact that the essence of Eliot's anxiety regarding the eclipse of poetry and language, in light of his historic situation, is inevitably more immediate and intense. It might not be unfair to suggest that a very real anxiety regarding the running out of poetic expression, and all that has served to engender it, is at its greatest with Eliot. Shelley never quite seems to envisage a decline of poetry, only the loss of a particular individual's poetry, such as we see in *Adonais*. For Shelley, silence also has a capacious serenity made tangible by its condition as an organic dimension of the natural world, and given substance through its interactive relationship with the poetic. For Browning, silence is also a fertile concept, both as a symbol of the diminishing returns of a lack of conversational and intellectual development, and as a means of exhibiting what a poetic persona might wish to obscure. As already suggested, silence in Browning has a less ethereal creativity than what we encountered in Shelley, insofar as it lends substance and character to the otherwise faint outline of the silent listener, and is also volubly expressive in the context of the unlived moment and undone action.

With Yeats we do see anxiety regarding the winding down of language but it is of a deeply personal kind. He does not envisage the death of poetry or the collapse of civilization so much as a fear that the language from which his own identity is constructed may desert him, or become unfamiliar, in the spiritual sphere that he also feels instinctively pulled towards. There is an expansive, non-dogmatic spiritualism that perplexes and submerges Yeats at the same time as it offers him an increase of clarity and solidity. With Eliot, however, there is a strangely reactionary aspect to his poetry, comprised primarily of an attraction to Catholicism and pre-war social values and aesthetics, that is perplexing in the context of a poet who espouses a need for newness. It is as though what Eliot seeks to fashion is the condition of the past, with all its richness and beauty, but through an originality of form, as if this newness were the last hope of recapturing and reinvigorating a more ancient beauty.

In every poet we have considered there has been a sense of this ageless purity from which all expression comes, and into which it all returns, though not without first having altered the condition of what it has traversed. I submit that the examples of silence we have discussed, in their many shapes and forms, have all emanated from this underlying sense of the oceanic, and the simultaneously numinous and blasphemous need for language of which Steiner spoke. It is a need that comes from silence and thus a need that interacts with and depends upon it quite as much as it seeks to supersede it. Just as every opposite is a dimension of what it appears to eclipse, so too is silence a part of language. The nature of

antithesis is, as Yeats suggested, the thing which is, “of all things not impossible, the most difficult”, and it may be that silence is that most difficult part of language, since its existence serves both as instigator and annihilator, and consequently always as a contradiction. Like language silence is part of our being but unlike language it is also part of our unknown and unknowable past and future, of our pre-history and our aftermath. It is in such obscure but essential areas that poetry finds its language, and it is through poetry that language may find its way back to the silence that first gave it a reason to speak.

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